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# AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTUAL SPACE IN DÜRRENMATT'S 'ROMULUS THE GREAT'

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#### **Synopsis:**

In this study, the use of textual space in Romulus the Great by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt will be discussed. How spaces are arranged in the text and what these spaces imply will be the focus. This study found that Dürrenmatt gives the textual space a form, a function, and a meaning. The scheming of the textual space, therefore, establishes a correspondence between the characters, the playwright, and the audience/readers.

# An Analysis of the Textual Space in Dürrenmatt's

## “Romulus the Great”

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### **Abstract**

In this study, the use of textual space in *Romulus the Great* by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt will be discussed. How spaces are arranged in the text and what these spaces imply will be the focus. In the view of Castells, characters live within the textual space, a world developed out of physical relations schemed by the playwright. More specifically, the playwright gives the textual space a form, a function, and a meaning. The scheming of the textual space, therefore, establishes a correspondence between the characters, the playwright, and the audience/readers. The findings of this research are presented as follows. First, textual space is a medium between the ideal of playwrights and the idea of audiences. Second, Dürrenmatt uses the notion of inconsistency, making his characters behave in a way that seems to be incoherent with the space they are within, hence increasing the absurdity of the work. Third, Dürrenmatt designs a conceptual space for all visual elements in this play for the audience to connect their notion or perception to these elements, hence giving them the feeling that they are virtually on spot in Romulus' summer house and experiencing everything with the characters. Fourth, Dürrenmatt uses the effect of sounds to emphasize the spatial imagination for the audience. Fifth, Dürrenmatt utilizes dialogues and items to extend audience's imagination for the plots that are about to happen. Lastly, Dürrenmatt cleverly uses the furniture in Romulus' bedroom, such as the space inside the wardrobe, behind the couch, and under the bed, to show several continuous assassinating attempts that failed to commit. In conclusion, we suggest that the research method we adopt in the current study should be introduced into the field of play text reading and explication so as to provide an alternative direction to play text analysis and criticism.

**Keywords: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, text, space, conceptual space, space perception**

*Dürrenmatt defines himself as a playwright who is not a “representative of any*

*particular movement in the theater, or any particular dramatic technique.*” “He is not an existentialist, a nihilist, an expressionist, or an ironist, or whatever labels get stuck on the jars in which literacy critics keep their preserves.” For Dürrenmatt, the stage is “not a field for theories” but rather “an instrument”. (Dürrenmatt, introduced by Evenson: xv)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The creative technique of playwrights has turned to be a major subject for my research for the past six years. The playwrights that I have been studying include Anton Chekhov, Molière, Aristophanes, Dario Fo, and Ibsen. The area of my research covers theme, structure, characters, symbols, comical techniques, and visual images. When I read the plays written by Dürrenmatt, such as *Romulus the Great*, *An Angel Comes to Babylon*, *The Visit*, and *The Physicists*, I was fascinated by the concreteness of the structure, the humorous language, the abundant imagination, the philosophical ideas, and the comical sarcasm, especially in *Romulus the Great*. Romulus, the emperor of the West Roman Empire, is sculpted as the terminator of the empire. The office became the room for breakfast instead of the room for him to handle the state affairs; the garden was converted as a chicken ranch; the bedroom was used for performing absurd failed political assassinations and promoting political propagandas instead of sleeping. The misplaced spaces are ironical, humorous, and interesting. The technique and effect of using these purposely misplaced textual spaces will be the purpose of this study.

The spaces described in text are “conceptualized spaces”. As Lefebvre points out in his work, “conceptualized spaces are spaces that scientists, urban planners, bureaucrats, and social engineers conceive and employ to identify lived and perceived spaces.” The “conceiver”, as Lefebvre categorizes, also includes artists and playwrights. The textual spaces created by playwrights are not only the vehicles to carry the physical characters, event and objects in the play but also the containers of the desire, ideal, thought and memories of the playwrights. Readers and audience generate spatial images while reading or watching the play. These images are once spatial ideas created by playwrights, and then transformed in the text format to be presented as scenarios. After a process of representation through language and words, these spatial images clearly build characteristics for spaces and characters within play

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<sup>1</sup> Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Selected Writings Volume 3, *Essays* Translated by Joel Agee Edited and with Introductions by Brian Evenson Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

text.

David Harvey studied the effect of progressing capitalism on time and space in his work *The Condition of Postmodernity*. In Harvey's (1989: 203) words, neither time nor space, the physicists now broadly propose, had existence (let alone meaning) before matter; the objective qualities of physical time-space cannot be understood, therefore, independently of the qualities of material processes. The meaning of textual space is therefore derived by translating the experiences and ideals of playwrights through the material space of playwright's character. In this thesis, the use of textual space in *Romulus the Great* by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt is discussed. How spaces are arranged in the text and what these spaces imply will be the main focus of our discussion; the research method that we adopt in this study will also be introduced into the field of play text reading and exploration in order to give an alternative direction to play text analysis and criticism.

## **2. Textual space as a spatial medium between the ideal of playwrights and the social, cultural notion of audience**

The first idea of space perception can be traced back to ancient Greece, when Aristotle announced his theory of "places(*topos*)". He stated that men can create and experience a sensation of space, and hence produce unique feelings for certain spaces.<sup>2</sup> The spaces within play texts are for characters to live in and present their feelings. The descriptions of the scenes written by playwrights are to represent their perceptions to the surroundings in the actual play through the interaction between characters and objects around these characters' universe. Kai I-Hsin described textual space as follows:

*The subjects' (readers or audiences) perception, conception and experiencing process for space are similar to their process for language. The process contains a series of receiving, coding and decoding, which implicated an interpretation to the meaning of spaces. Once a physical space image is decoded, it is recomposed and recoded through a symbolic medium, such as texts, and represented in front of the subject (readers or audiences) afterward. When the medium language is decoded, perceived and felt, a deviation of its original meaning is occurred.*<sup>3</sup>

(Kai I-Hsin 175)

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<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, *Physics*, Book 1, Chapter 1, 209b, 210a, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random, 1941: 272-73.

<sup>3</sup> Kai I-Hsin. *Space, Memory, and Identity: Reading Eric Liu's "The Accidental Asian"*. *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly*, Volume 33, No.12, page 157, National Taiwan University Press, Taipei, 2005.

Textual space is also described by Manuel Castells (311) as composed of material dimensions that are interrelated to other material elements.<sup>4</sup> This means that when characters stay within the world of physical relationship planned by the playwright, the textual spaces are given a form, a function and a meaning. The planning of textual spaces will give a corresponding relationship among the characters, the playwrights, and the reader/audience.

Dürrenmatt created *Romulus the Great* in 1948 based on the story of abdication of Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire. In the morning of March 15, 476, when Germanic people were about to invade Campania and the Western Roman Empire was about to fall, the emperor, Romulus, still had no reaction about it. He stayed in his countryside mansion feeding chickens and eating eggs – which he had been doing for over two decades. His queen, his princess, his officials, and even Flavius Zeno – the emperor escaping from the already fallen Eastern Roman Empire, all tried to convince him to resist, but he refused to take any military action; he continued to sell the antique bust left by the former emperor and famous figures.

A businessman called Caesar Rupf offered to pay ten-million gold pieces to bribe the Germans to retreat, in exchange for the marriage with the princess. Queen Julia, Princess Rea and Aemilian, fiancé of Rea, all accepted the term in favor of their nation. However, Romulus still refused the term even though it could be the only way to save the Western Roman Empire. He told everyone that he intended to end the empire by not acting, and positioned himself as the ultimate jury for the world. When everyone else escaped, Romulus stayed in his villa waiting for death. He met Odoacer, the leader of German invader, the next morning. Surprisingly, Odoacer had no intention to kill Romulus and treated the defeated Emperor with a friendly attitude. Odoacer even submitted himself to Romulus because he already foresaw that his nephew would betray him in the future. After a heart-to-heart conversation, Romulus abdicated on the same day, and enjoyed the nice mansion and the 6000-cent salary provided by Odoacer. Odoacer became the king of the newly formed kingdom named Italy.

Dürrenmatt, based on Roman history, made up a comical story with his own

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<sup>4</sup> As stated by Manuel Castells in his *Grassrooting the space of flows*, "Space is society's fundamental material dimensions...Material and consciousness are interrelated." ( Castells 311 )

observation in a sharp cold tone. The work was created at the time just after the end of the Second World War, when the old empires collapsed and the new empire was about to be founded. Compared to other European writers, as a citizen of a permanent neutral country, Dürrenmatt had a very different perspective toward the invaders. J. L. Styan (1969) commented on Dürrenmatt's work as follows: "*Dürrenmatt's experiments doubtless arise from the freedom he feels as a Swiss neutral in a world of polarized ideologies.*" Drama is an art form about senses, which Dürrenmatt used extensively in his works. The scenarios such as breeding chickens, eating chicken eggs, and selling antique busts are all presented in a form of performance art. The idea was extracted from real life experiences of the audience, so when audience sees these scenarios being performed, they can immediately be connected to their real life experiences and stimulate their imaginations to create a spatial image in their minds.

The textual space functions as a medium between the ideal of the playwright and the sensible, social, and cultural space of the audience. Text is the vanguard of a whole drama performance, the purpose for which is to be converted to be a drama on the stage. Art of drama is never completed with only texts; the final presentation of the art must be manifested in performance. After the performance, drama becomes organic (or alive). If the spatial elements designed in a play cannot serve as the medium between playwrights' ideals and audience' senses, hence manifesting the social and cultural meaning nor can these elements be presented on the stage, the design is meaningless. The play can hardly become a reference for actors to perform on the stage.

### **3. Textual space used as crucial condition for modeling absurd characters.**

At the beginning of the first act in *Romulus* the great, Spurius, the cavalry officer rushed non-stop from the battle field to the summer mansion of Emperor Romulus. The worried cavalry officer was eager to report the grim news about the collapse of the Roman front line and the approaching of the Germanic force. He yelled, "*The great Roman Empire is Collapsing!*" (Dürrenmatt7). However, what he saw beside the front gate were only two old, immobilized servants-Pyramus and Achilles. Only when the cavalry officer approached Achilles and shook him in a frenzy did Pyramus responded:

*Pyramus: A word of advice, young man. Go to the imperial high steward, add your name to the list of new arrivals, request permission from the minister of the interior to deliver an important message to the imperial court, and you will be permitted to deliver your message to the emperor in*

*the course of the next few days, perhaps even in person.*

*(The perfect no longer knows what to think.)*

*Spurius Titus Mamma: To the imperial high steward!*

*Pyramus: Right around the corner, third door on the left.*

*Spurius Titus Mamma: To the Minister of the interior!*

*Pyramus: Seventh door on the right.*

*Spurius Titus Mamma: (still beside himself): To deliver my awful news in the course of the next few days!*

*Achilles: In the course of the next few weeks.*

*Spurius Titus Mamma: Unhappy Rome! Brought down by two valets!*

*(Dürrenmatt 130)*

Before Romulus made his first appearance, Dürrenmatt set the scenario of an emergency meeting. Even under the very critical circumstance, the valets still requested the cavalry officer to add his name on the list of the imperial high steward, and he had to go the “third door on the left”. Then, to see the minister of the interior to deliver the emergency news, he had to go to the “seventh door on the right”. The absurd difficulty that the cavalry officer faced through the use of textual space in this scenario is a technique manifest by Dürrenmatt to lead audience to imagine the figure of Romulus. While Romulus came on the stage with his crown and purple robe, the first order that he gave is to reward his officers, so he called for the minister of finance. However, the minister of finance had already run away with the empty safe box to “cover up the total bankruptcy of the empire”. Romulus praised the minister of finance for successfully distracting people’s attention from a larger scandal to his malfeasance. Romulus peeled off two golden leaves from his crown, (which used to have thirty-six when he took over the throne but which had only five left now), to his attendant to pay the debt.

Romulus then started eating his breakfast (mainly made of chicken eggs) in his office, and continued his favorite topic of chicken breeding. Tullius, the minister of the interior, entered the stage in panic, and reported to him in a shaking voice:

*Tullius Rotundus: The perfect Spurius Titus Mamma galloped two days and two nights to bring Your Majesty fearful news from Pavia.*

*Romulus: Two days and two nights? I’m impressed. Let him be knighted for this athletic feat.*

*Tullius Rotundus: I will lead the high perfect Spurius Titus Mamma to Your Majesty right away.*



*Romulus: But isn't he tired?*

*Tullius Rotundus: He is close to a physical and emotional collapse.*

*Romulus: Then take him to the quietest guest chamber of my house, Tullius Rotundus . Even athletes have to sleep.*

*(The minister of the interior is taken aback.)*

*Tullius Rotundus: What about the bad news, Your Majesty?*

*Romulus: Even the worst news sounds quite pleasant enough from the mouth of a person who is well rested, freshly bathed, shaved, and well fed.*

*Let him come tomorrow. (Dürrenmatt 133)*

Dürrenmatt rendered his characters absurd by making them do acts that were not cohesive with the function of the space which these character were embedded in. From the democratic ideal point of view, governmental institutes should be the most convenient for citizens to reach; however, the cavalry officer had to go to the “third door on the left” and then the “seventh door on the right” to deliver the emergency news. Even by doing so, he still could not see the emperor. The office, which was used to discuss public affairs, was transformed by Romulus to be his breakfast room. When the cavalry officer came to the front of the office, and was about to deliver the news to him, he wanted the office to take a rest and come tomorrow, and he even provided his private chamber for the officer to sleep. Dürrenmatt modeled absurd characters from the aforementioned mismatched space – action relationship. Hence, the setting of textual space turned to be the crucial elements for his technique to take effect.

#### **4. Textual space as spaces that help audience create visual perception**

The main elements that support the construction of textual spaces are visual elements, and they can be divided into two categories: passive and active. Looking at passive visual elements is similar to looking at paintings, pictures, or stage settings. The audiences can imagine a picture through the description of text or construct a space through stage setting. The vanish point, depth of field, light, shade and distance can be constructed through the mind and eyes of audiences. Active visual elements, on the other hand, are the movement of characters, stage props, objects, or the change of settings. A field of depth can be presented if an object changes size during its movement, or moves according to perspective focuses.

One important technique to create textual spaces is through the stage direction of settings. These include the cues of lights and sounds, the entrance and exit of objects and staff, the physical direction of gestures and body movement. Since these elements concern the practicality of the performances and the scopes of creation of

directors and participating artists, the playwright must have a clear picture for the effect of stage beforehand, and mark necessary cues in script writing so as to create readers' and audiences' consciousness of virtual spaces.<sup>5</sup>

Playwrights use text to connect to the perception of readers and audiences, hence creating visual experiences through it. However, Dürrenmatt not only built his world by text but also carried it out by paint. As he explicated, "*I conceived of the text as an exercise for actors, in order to be able to say as much as possible with a minimum of dramaturgical means. Before writing the play, I made a pictorial representation in mixed media.*" His brainstorming of both pictures and words has become a foundation for other directors or artists to produce works. Dürrenmatt gave the visual stage directions at the beginning of the first three acts in the office, garden and bedroom of Emperor Romulu as follows:

*Here, too, everything seems to him at first empty and deserted. There are a few chairs, wobbly, falling apart; on the walls, the venerable busts of the statesmen, thinkers, and poets of Roman history. All with somewhat exaggeratedly grave features...* ( Dürrenmatt 129 )

.....  
*A park in front of the emperor's country house. Moss, ivy, and weeds everywhere, chicken clucking, cocks crowing... Scrawled in chalk on the walls of the house: "Long live serfdom! Long live liberty!" But the predominant impression is definitely that of a chicken yard, even though, front stage right, there are a few rather delicately fashioned garden chairs that have seen better days.*  
(Dürrenmatt 149)

.....  
*The Emperor's bedroom. On the left, a row of windows. In the background, the door. On the right, the bed and another door. In the middle of the room two couches joined at an angle that opens widely toward the audience. In the middle between them a small, low, delicately fashioned table. In the foreground two wardrobes, one on the left and one on the right. Night. Full moon. The room lies*

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<sup>5</sup> In his *General Psychology*, Peng, Dan-ling states that *space perception is a human reflection to surrounding objective space, which includes perception of shapes, size, depth, distance, direction and orientation. The space perception is very important for humans to interact with surrounding environments. Human cannot survive without the knowledge of these space properties. Perception of shape and size is required to identify objects; perception of depth and distance is to identify the relative distance; perception of direction and orientation is important for ensure the location.*

*in darkness except for planes of light projected onto the floors and walls through the windows. The door in the background opens. Pyramus appears with a three-armed candelabrum, which he uses to light a second one next to the bed. Then he comes to the foreground and puts the candelabrum on the table. The emperor appears in the door on the right, dressed in a rather shabby nightshirt. Behind him, Achilles. (Dürrenmatt 162)*

A discussion has been previously offered in Chapter One relating to Lefebvre's statement of perceived space, conceived space, and lived space, which constitutes a trinity. In the stage direction of Act One, Dürrenmatt used chairs, walls, sculptures, and busts to construct the villa of Romulus. In Act Two, mosses, ivies, weeds, and smeared walls compose the exterior setting of the villa. In Act Three, visual materials such as the bedroom, window, table, wardrobe, light spots on the floors, candelabra, and shabby nightshirt are all conceived representations of space designed by Dürrenmatt. All the arrangements are intended to give audiences connection between the visual materials and audiences' perception toward these materials, hence having a realistic feeling that they are within the lived space of Romulus' villa and experiencing everything with the emperor.

Tuan pointed out that experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality, which activates space perception. Experience and senses enable human beings to have feelings for space and spatial qualities, which can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and—more abstractly—as the area defined by a network of place. The organization of human space is uniquely dependent on not only sight but also hearing (Tuan 6). Tuan thus maintained that human can achieve space perception through sound: *For example, Sounds, though vaguely located, can convey a strong sense of size (volume) and of distance. Also, in an empty cathedral the sound of footsteps tapping sharply on the stone floor creates an impression of cavernous vastness.* (Tuan 14-15)

##### **5. Textual space as spaces that build hearing and smell senses for audiences.**

Aristotle categorized human senses into five categories: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch (Aristotle 103). Human uses sense organs, such as eyes to collect outside information. The information collected this way are then carried by nerve system to human's central processor – the brain – to compile a meaningful message or a physical image. Human uses multiple senses simultaneously such as smell, hearing or touching when sensing an object, and then employs previous experience and perception to understand the object. Organ senses not only transmit the “correctness”

of the identity of an object, but also serve as clues to guide us to walk into the world which created by the playwright.

In addition to using visual elements to create a sensible space, Dürrenmatt also used sounds to amplify the effect. He described the garden of Romulus' summer Mansion as follows: *Moss, ivy, and weeds everywhere, chicken clucking, cocks crowing. Now and again chickens fly across the stage, especially when someone enters* (Dürrenmatt 149). Whenever a character enters the stage and passes the garden, it always comes with chicken clucks. These characters include the chief, who bred the chicken for Romulus, Zeno, the emperor of the already fallen East Roman Empire, Spurius, the Calvary officer who wish to see his emperor but never get a chance to, Aemilian, the nobleman who had been imprisoned by the Germans for three years, the messenger who brought emergency news about the total defeat of Roman army and Caesar Rupf, and, lastly, the businessman who offered a trade to save the nation. All of these characters came one by one, urgently wishing to meet Romulus. The cackling of hens was made when these characters passed the yard, which not only created a feeling of disorder toward the whole environment, but also amplifying the situation that these visitors have to face, therefore making the audience more sympatric toward their patriotic passion. This also shows the absurdity of Romulus' unwillingness to act for the country but his passion on breeding chickens. The patriotic passion of the visitors is in great contrast to the lazy afternoon snoring of the emperor.

Smells can also cause a strong effect on human emotion; they are a type of underlying memories which store our unconscious, or even unnoticed notion, hence affecting our behavior. As Chen Chie-Peng illustrated, "*...each (area) has a unique smell of its own. The most obvious difference between two areas or spaces is not always visual, non-visual landscape, especially landscape of smell, usually take the most important role in distinguish the difference...*" (Chen , Chie-Peng 115).

Dürrenmatt used the smell of smoke to describe Romulus' unwillingness for taking any action to save the Roman Empire. The enemies were yet to come, but the emperor was already losing his will to resist and was preparing to deal with the aftermath of nation's falling:

*Zeno: Here we are trying feverishly to save civilization – what's that smell?*

*Tullius Rotundus: We are burning the archives.*

*(Zeno is thunderstruck.)*

*Zeno: You--are--burning the archives?*

*Tullius Rotundus: These valuable documents of Roman statecraft must under no circumstances fall into the hands of the Teutons, and we don't have the financial means to transport them to a safe place.*

*Zeno: So you just burn the archives, as if there were no faith in the final triumph of the good. Your western empire is really beyond help, it's rotten to the core. No spirit, no courage – there, another egg! (He wipes his sandals)*  
*(Dürrenmatt 150)*

Dürrenmatt exploited the smell produced by burning the documents of the West Roman Empire to create an “off-stage” space for characters to show their incompetence, in contrast to the worrying officials within “on-stage” space. Spurius, the cavalry captain, spoke of everyone’s thought by saying “*This smoke, this eternal acrid smoke*” (Dürrenmatt 35).

## **6. Textual spaces enable audiences to extend their imagination**

Text is the foundation of a drama performance which not only offers the development of scenarios, but also gives direction to where the scenario happens, so the actors can follow accordingly. The space composition needed for developing scenarios and the directions needed for stage performance can all be found logically in the play text. The decorated words and sentences give explanations to objects within a space, which also bring out the atmosphere of the environment. The descriptive words about the state of mind for the characters, and their interaction with objects within the space can stimulate audience’s imagination, and bring further meanings to the scene.

Dürrenmatt planned a mise-en-abyme in Act Two, when Princess Rea played a scene from *Antigone* and brought the story back to ancient Greece. Aemilian, her fiancé, was among one of the audience who watched the play. The scenarios in this play within a play reminded Aemilian about the princess who engaged with him three years ago. When Rea recognized the ring which Aemilian carried, the two finally reunited (Dürrenmatt 33)

*Rea: Then give me your hand.*

*(She stretches out her right hand. Aemilian puts his left hand in hers.)*

*Rea: The ring! Aemilian's ring!*

*Aemilian: Your bridegroom's ring.*

*Rea: He's dead.*

*Aemilian: Slaughtered.*

*Rea: Some flesh has grown back over the ring.*

*(She stares at the hand lying in hers.)*

*Aemilian: It has become one with my violated flesh.*

*Rea: Aemilian! You are Aemilian! (Dürrenmatt 155)*

The audiences' imagination was created through the dialogues in *mise-en-abyme*. Two characters had been separated for three years because of the German invasion, and the ring became the key item for audience to imagine the separation, and created the mood for reunion. Also in the same act, Dürrenmatt planned a dialogue between Romulus and Aemilian:

*Aemilian: I'm no longer worthy of receiving your daughter, Emperor of Rome.*

*Romulus: You are not unworthy, only unhappy.*

*Aemilian: Violated. The Teutons tore off my scalp and forced me to crawl beneath a blood-smeared yoke. Naked. Like an animal. Look here!*

*(He tears the cap off his head and stands there, scalped, but in such a way that the audience does not see the horrible sight.)*

*Aemilian: Here I stand, Emperor of Rome, surrounded by the flutter of your imperial fowl, by your ridicules retinue, a man who loved peace and believed in the mind, who went to the Teutons to reconcile them with the Romans.*

*(Dürrenmatt 160)*

After three years of imprisonment, Aemilian finally returned home alive. No one would believe what kind of suffering he endured if he only described it with spoken words, so he brought his scalp with hairs to prove his words; this also brought audience to the shameful situation in the past when he was forced to crawl underneath a blood-smeared yoke.

In Act Three, Queen Julia could no longer stand for Romulus' unwillingness to act and decided to leave the nation to protect herself. She came to Romulus to do the last farewell:

*(Silence.)*

*Julia: I have come to speak with you for the last time.*

*Romulus: You're wearing your traveling outfit, my dear wife.*

*Julia: I'm leaving for Sicily tonight.*

*Romulus: Is the fishing boat ready?*

*Julia: A raft.*

*Romulus: But isn't that a little dangerous?*

*Julia: To stay is more dangerous.*

*(Silence.)*

*Romulus: I wish you a good journey.*

*Julia: We may not see each other for a long time.*

*Romulus: We will never see each other again.*

*Julia: I am determined to continue the resistance against the enemy from Sicily. At any price.*

*Romulus: Resistance at any price is the most pointless thing there can be.*

(Dürrenmatt 163-164)

Dürrenmatt used the image of travelling cloth and raft to show the determination for the queen to leave. In the conversation, Romulus showed his care to his wife by asking whether she prepared a fishing boat, but the emperor showed no hesitation about his purposely inaction. The conversations and items were planned by Dürrenmatt to create a space toward destruction, both physically and psychologically, for Romulus, which was his summer villa. Another space was created this way to show the queen's desire to run away from the emperor and the destructive world, which was Sicily. In these cases, conversations and items were the essential component for Dürrenmatt to stimulate audiences' imagination about the already happening and upcoming scenarios.

## **7. Textual space as a crucial stage for developing absurd scenario and paradoxical conflict**

The time and space in a play text is changed as characters enter or leave the stage. Whenever there is a character on stage, there is a corresponding time and space; when there is no character on stage, the stage space is just an empty space. Because in modern theaters, the changing of setting can be very flexible, so these assumed theatrical time and space must be kept constant, and physical sceneries and props are also needed in combination with actor's dramatic actions to properly show the scenario and the conflict. The presence of characters not only depicts the development of the story and interprets the moods, but also expresses the surrounding space and time through theatrical actions. By all these means the imagination of audience can be stimulated, and the circumstances in the play can be fully felt.

Playwrights, especially comedy playwrights, favor using space to create absurd

scenarios and develop conflicts. A good example can be found in the comedy of *The Marriage of Figaro* by Pierre Beaumarchais (1732-1799). In the first act of the comedy which set in the bedroom, the young page Cherubino was confessing his love for the countess to Suzanne, the maid of the countess. The count however, happened to break into the room, so Cherubino had to hide behind the chair and watched the count making a pass at Suzanne with no respect. Suddenly, Bazile, the music master for the countess also walked into the room, and the count had to hide behind the chair too, which forced Cherubino to switch his hideout. Bazile spoke to Suzanne about how the count planned to possess her, and revealed Cherubino's secret love toward the countess. The enraged count jumped out from his hideout, which forced Cherubino to reveal himself. The act ended in an argument, in which the count forced Cherubino to join the army. In this scenario setting, Beaumarchais used chairs and other hidden space to make the audience uncover the true selfishness and greediness in the noble count.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan<sup>6</sup> in his work *The School for Scandal* planned a scenario for the secret affair between Lady Teazle and Joseph Surface, which happened in Joseph's house. Suddenly, Sir Peter Teazle came to visit Joseph without notification; Joseph had to hide Lady Teazle behind the screen. Sheridan used the screen as a device to show the selfish, extravagant, and tale-bearing side of upper-classmen. The French playwright Molière (1622-1673) used the interior setting of Orgon family in *Tartuffe* to hide two characters - Damis and Orgon inside the cupboard and under the table, so they could secretly monitor Tartuffe's act and reveal his true hypocritical character. This serves as the essential scene of the whole play. The audiences could not be conceived if Tartuffe's hypocritical actions and Elmire's clever plan to hide Damis and Orgon were not manifested through the interior setting.

Dürrenmatt arranged an absurd situation in Act Three of *Romulus the Great*. Aemilian hid in the dark corner of Romulus' bedroom and planned to assassinate the father of his lover, also an incompetent emperor who was in no will to defend the nation, which Aemilian took to be unacceptable. However, the assassination failed as his image was reflected on the wine cup, and he was then invited to drink together with the supposed victim of his assassination. When the two men was about to drink, they heard someone crying in pain - Tullius, the minister of the interior, crawling out from the bottom of Romulus' couch because Romulus just stepped on his finger. He

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), born in Dublin, Ireland, is the quintessential playwright for the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Comedy of Manner. He wrote seven comedies including: *The Rivals*, *A Trip to Scarborough*, *St. Patrick's Day*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Critic*, and *The Duenna and The Camp*. His plays criticize the corruption of British upper class with the spirit of enlightenment.



tried to cover up his face by making up an excuse saying he was just coming to suggest a type of insurance for elderly people in the empire. When Romulus pointed out that his finger was bleeding, he explained: *I was so startled I scratched myself with my dagger.* (Dürrenmatt 170)

Romulus wanted to treat Tullius, so he opened the cupboard. He did not expect that Zeno, the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, would hide in the cupboard and “*somewhat bent*” (Dürrenmatt 170). Romulus apologized to Zeno for not knowing he was sleeping in the wardrobe as Zeno replied: *No need to worry, I’m used to it. My life has been quite unsettled since I had to flee from Constantinople* (Dürrenmatt 171). Romulus tried to resolve the awkward situation by saying: *Don’t let it bother you. They came in here by pure chance* (Dürrenmatt 171). He removed a piece of cloth from the upper shelf just to discover that Sulphurides, the servant of Zeno, was also hidden in the cupboard. Romulus noticed that Sulphurides was tall so he started to blame Zeno: *You could have used the other wardrobe for him* (Dürrenmatt 171). He also asked Zeno where he placed another of his midget servant when Phosphoridos, the midget, crawled out of Romulus’s bed and started to complain.

Another wardrobe was also opened to reveal Spurius, the cavalry captain, who quickly picked up his dagger in panic and hid it inside the black robe that he wore. Mars, the minister of defense also crawled out of the couch with a soldier along with Romulus’ most trusted cook; all of them wore black coats. This was the first time in the act when Romulus really felt surprised.

Dürrenmatt used the cupboard, couch, bed as spaces to present the attempts for assassination. However, the assumed bloody assassinations were never committed. One assassin was invited by the target to drink together; another’s finger was stomped by the target, who even cut himself by the dagger that he prepared because of nervousness. Other guests who attempted to commit the crime hid in the improper places –as the tall servant had to hide in a small cupboard while the larger wardrobe already had someone who had hidden for too long and collapsed when discovered. A midget killer hid in the large space under the bed and complained, while the space under the couch could contain three people. The whole space was transformed by Dürrenmatt as a space full of comical elements and absurdities. All of these comical situations could not be achieved without using props to divide a space for characters to hide in; the revealing of these characters also revealed the absurd, hypercritical and incompetent nature of the characters to audiences. The space was rendered to be a device to develop absurd and conflict scenarios.

## 8. Conclusion

Conceptual textual space is transformed by playwrights as play texts to describe the scenario faced by characters in play. The property of space and characters are then represented through the transformation from conceptual space to physical language and texts, which leads to the following conclusions for this analysis:

1. Textual space is a medium between the ideal of playwrights and the notion of audiences, which leads audiences to exercise their own experiences in real life. Dürrenmatt arranged artistically processed and extracted plots based on real life scenarios, such as breeding chickens, eating eggs, and selling inherited treasures. As audiences received the visual and audio messages, they can immediately connect to their own experiences and reproduce images in their minds.
2. Dürrenmatt applied inconsistency, made his characters do actions that were seemingly incoherent to the space that they were within, and hence increased the absurdity of these characters. The cavalry officer had to travel to “third door to the left” and then “seventh door to the right” yet he still failed to deliver the emergency news to the emperor. Such textual space arrangement is the key to model absurd characters.
3. Dürrenmatt designed a conceptual space for all visual elements in this play for the audiences to connect their notion or perception to these elements, and hence gave them the feeling that they were virtually on spot in Romulus’ summer house and were experiencing everything with the characters.
4. Dürrenmatt also used sounds to emphasize the spatial imagination for audiences, which applied whenever a character appeared on stage and walked through the garden, where a series of chicken cluck always followed. The sound effect not only gave a feeling of disorder to the environment, but also created a strong contrast between the disinterest, snoring Romulus and the worrying, patriotic visitors.
5. Dürrenmatt used dialogues and items to extend audiences’ imaginations for plots that were about to happen. The queen wore travel clothes and prepared a boat to show her determination to leave; Aemilian took out a chunk of his scalp with hairs to reshew how he was humiliated by the German invaders.
6. Dürrenmatt cleverly used the furniture in Romulus’ bedroom, such as the spaces inside the wardrobe, behind the couch, and under the bed to show several continuous assassinating attempts that eventually failed. The intension for bloody assassinations was transformed by Dürrenmatt to total absurdity and humors through the use of space.

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