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## THE FAMILY, TRADITION AND ART IN THE THEATER OF GUNARS PRIEDE

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If five years ago a traveler passing through Latvia<sup>1</sup> had asked the theater-going public of Riga who was the current best Soviet Latvian dramatist, the overwhelming consensus would have been: Gunārs Priede. Indeed, compared to other popular Latvian playwrights of the early 1970s, such as Venta Vigante<sup>2</sup> and Arturs Vilks,<sup>3</sup> Priede stands out not only for his engaging characters, the suspense he creates and the techniques he uses masterfully — particularly light and sound — but for the depth and complexity with which he treats such eternal themes as love, the generation gap, and family relationships. Most remarkable is his ability to give psychological depth to all types of characters, from teenagers to senior citizens, men and women. He also has the rare gift of sympathizing with all of his characters. There are no heroes or villains in his theater, only beings more or less fortunate. The only transcendent moral is that the more favored should show compassion for their less fortunate co-inhabitants of this world and help them in their quest for personal fulfillment and happiness.

Although there are occasional allusions to the socialist order which by inference is to be considered "ideal" or at least "superior" to other social systems, none of his plays, whatever its genre, proclaims or advocates any ideological or political doctrine. Instead, his works are imbued with universal humanistic values, though expressed through characteristically Eastern-European, and most often specifically Baltic, literary and cultural traditions.

### Genre

While it is not unusual for dramatists to try out the entire dramatic register from tragedy to comedy — one immediately thinks of Shakespeare, Corneille, and more recently, Jean Anouilh — most find one end of the scale more attuned to their particular talents (Molière, Racine). Gunārs Priede, however, would be difficult to classify. His comedies are cheerful and heartwarming although their intrigue is woven from the disorders of modern urban societies; his dramas, reminiscent of antique tragedies, poignantly show the flower of humanity doomed by fatalistic forces.

Of the five plays contained in the volume published by Liesma (Riga, 1973), one is classified as a comedy, two as dramas, and two others simply as "plays." However, they fall quite neatly into two categories: 1) the dramas are in fact contemporary tragedies, showing kinship with their early Greek counterparts; and (2) all the others are essentially comedies. *Otilijas bērnu bērni* (Otilia's Children's Children, 1970) is classified by Priede as a comedy perhaps because the ending is more traditional: it ends with reconciliations, the marriage of one couple and the promise of marriage of another, much as Molière would have done it. The endings of the other two comedies, also involving the traditional promises of marriage of two young couples, sound a few serious notes as well: the imminent death of the matriarch in *Uz Aivaru gaidot* (Waiting for Aivars, 1972)<sup>4</sup> and an invalid's disappointment in love with his simultaneous discovery of a deeper satisfaction in *Vecrigas libiesas portrets* (The Portrait of a Livian from Old Riga, 1971).<sup>5</sup>

Priede's theater falls into two distinct categories also because of its thematic content. His *comedies* condemn modern social tendencies which result in the degradation of the individual and the destruction of the social fiber. They extol traditional virtues, particularly those rooted in country life and literary tradition. His *dramas*, on the other hand, show in a blow-up those critical moments in the life of individuals on which their destiny hinges. The psychological portrayal of the main characters highlights universal traits. Furthermore, the dramas are permeated by an international atmosphere through the use of foreign settings, allusions to other parts of the world (Italy, Turkey, Argentina, England, the U.S.), the

use of foreign languages (English, German, Russian), music (Ravel's *Bolero*, Gershwin, Georgian and gypsy folksongs), and other customs and lifestyles.

## Themes

The most recurring and dominant theme in all of Priede's plays is that of family unity and strength. Whatever the genre and tone of the particular play, the underlying concern is for the family as the basic unit of society. Each play is an illustration of various family groupings: two-parent, one-parent, grandparent-grandchild, the whole clan, and so on. The strength or weakness of family traditions and bonds is shown as determining the success or failure of the society which these families constitute.

The other themes are subordinated to the overall motif of the family: love (always shown as affecting family ties); rebellion of the young or delinquency; self-respect and fulfillment; cultural traditions; women's roles, i.e. career vs. motherhood.

## Characters

The family Priede casts in his plays is as diverse as can be found in any nation, ranging from the urban microcosm of father-mother-son to the representation of a whole clan in its country setting, including three generations, in-laws and future spouses and friends of grandchildren. Priede shows unusual penetration and understanding of *all* the roles in the family structure. His characters include a grandfather, grandmothers, great-aunts, fathers and mothers (the latter also as single parents), good and bad sons, daughters, and grandchildren of both sexes. By the diversity of his examples Priede shows that there is not a single ideal family structure, that successful families are formed by bonds of love and respect, not the observance of specific roles. The positive family images are contrasted with their negative counterparts, i.e. non-families, unattached individuals floating in society and desperately trying to form ties, such as orphans with and without parents, divorcees, single women with children, hippies. This array of family and non-family types seems to take rank along a scale of social worth and self-fulfillment: at the negative end, the "wayward son" types; at the positive end, the matriarch who often is the only force capable of forming, nurturing and preserving the family structure. The most striking example of this bipolar structuring of Priede's array of characters is Otilia, the protagonist in *Otilia's Children's Children*.<sup>6</sup> Otilia is a grandmother who has remained in the country and has acquired the reputation of champion milker and husbandry-woman on her collective farm. Her daughters and grandchildren live in the city (Riga), subject to the pressures of modern urban life: long working hours, commuting, living in crowded conditions. The young are exposed to bad influences in school or in the streets, and often turn to juvenile delinquency, sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, and trafficking in foreign goods. These corrupting effects have taken their toll on the second generation: one of Otilia's grandsons is a "hooligan," a drop-out totally apathetic towards life who has fallen under the influence of friends even further down the road to self-destruction than he. In two other plays, *Waiting* and *Zilā* (The Blue One, 1972) we find the matriarch — wayward son opposition.

While Priede's admiration seems to go unreservedly towards the hard-working, big-hearted matriarch, middle-aged characters get varied treatment, ranging from the caricatural representation of Otilia's overbearing daughters and her hen-pecked son-in-law, to a sympathetic understanding of both the male and female psyche in the tragic dramas *Ugunskurs lejā pie stacijas* (The Bonfire Down by the Station, 1970) and *The Blue One*. Priede's lack of prejudice toward any group or type of individual is most apparent in *Portrait*, in which he casts a motley group of continuing education students.

Young adults in their late teens and early twenties of both sexes are important characters in all five plays, although they are never the true protagonists. Among the younger characters, women are given on the whole a more positive treatment than men. The orphan Helga in *Otilia* is a model of all virtues. So is Daisy in *Waiting*, although her outstanding character traits are a mature sense of independence, sound judgment and initiative. Rudite in *Bonfire* is almost angelic in her goodness. Even the promiscuous Linda in *The Blue One* is admirably faithful and tenacious in certain ways.

On the other hand, none of the young men is fully positive. Many are hooligans of various degrees of hardening (Victor, George, Bepo, Juris) or even hippies (Joe, Quack, Raivis). The best of the lot exhibit characteristics of brutality (Janis in *Waiting*, Andris in *Portrait*) or rebellion (Didzis in *Bonfire*) while the idealized Alvars turns out to be a merely average young man. Several of the young men are physically handicapped: Juris in *The Blue One* is an invalid recovering from an accident; Dainis in *Otilia* and Raivis in *Waiting* are small and delicate weaklings; the hippies Joe and Quack are represented as spineless automatons due to their parents' and their own alcoholism; and Gustav in *Portrait* is dumb as a result of an explosion in which he was almost killed.

While Priede shows obvious concern for the young, they nevertheless are not the true protagonists of his theater. The limelight falls on either the savior-matriarch or the fate-struck middle-aged man or woman. Yet these characters are always surrounded by the young and their fate is determined by them. In fact, they live for the young, always subordinating their own desires to the well-being of the younger generation. For instance, Otilia puts off her retirement in order to help establish her grandson; Valdis in *Bonfire* risks his marriage and even his life to save a young girl of his kin. Priede thus represents man as a link in the chain of humanity, not as an individual who may decide his own destiny without regard for others. Priede's conception of the person is neither Christian nor existential, to name but two main Western currents of thought. Rather, he shows man as a product of his past, of his environment, and deeply responsible for the shaping of future generations. Thus he represents man as partially predetermined yet capable of exercising his will within an historical continuum. Man's decisions are dictated by moral judgments which do not emanate from any religious or ideological code, but from deep-seated humanistic traditions.

## Stagecraft

Of the five plays discussed here, four have three acts and one has two. They are all of approximately the same length. All have a rapid rhythm, for the entry and exit of characters is frequent, even in those with a single set and action that is psychological (*Bonfire*, *The Blue One*).

In Priede's plays, the setting is an integral part of the action. The action is in fact dependent upon the setting. In *Otilia*, the broken furniture and holes in the wall not only show that Bepo is a hooligan, but many of the comic effects in the first act are derived from this, as when Otilia sits down in the too-hastily repaired broken chair, or Martha leans against the table with a wobbly leg. The gypsy bonfire not only gives another play its title, but provides the timing and the true focal point around which the action takes place. It begins as the fire is lit and ends with the last smoldering embers. *Waiting*, which is essentially a hymn to humanistic values embodied in Latvian folkloric traditions, arts and crafts, is set in an old farmhouse (not a modern collective farm) with hand-carved furniture, hand-loomed coverings, flowers, candles and other artifacts creating the effect of artful traditional warmth. The old farmhouse appears as a shrine to which the larger family flocks for spiritual replenishment. Within this shrine the inner sanctum is the grandmother's room, resplendent with examples of the decorative arts, where the grandmother and the mother solemnly (nopietni un svinīgi) celebrate the Sabbath by reading the poems of Aija Elksne in a liturgical style (bez izteiksmes).<sup>7</sup> *The Blue One* is set in a Georgian resort on the Black Sea. This distancing in space corresponds to several psychological factors. The characters have recently been through a tragic experience which has nearly destroyed them physically as well as emotionally. They need southern warmth and beauty to regain equilibrium physically separated from the scene of their trauma. The foreign resort setting also reflects the financial status and the cosmopolitanism of this family of professionals.

For every one of the plays, the settings are lengthily explained in detail and meant to be faithfully executed by stage directors. It would be inconceivable for these plays to be presented as theater-in-the-round or in other ways devoid of sets. In fact, Priede goes so far as to extend the visual representation of the scene beyond the traditional stage set. In *Otilia*, each scene involving a different set — six in all — is preceded and followed by a sequence of slides or film projected on the curtain, which shows the action continuing in a different locale, usually outside the room represented by the set.

It is in *Portrait* that the setting is most specific and most important. In fact, it is the *raison d'être* of the action: a group of architecture students is studying old monuments in Riga. Therefore, the action is set in the Old City. The decor shows views of the Dom Church. The sounds of an organ concert are heard. Setting and action are closely integrated, and Priede draws maximum effects from it for gags, suspense, and symbolism. There are fourteen scenes involving six sets which represent various rooms in the school of architecture and a street scene.

Priede also creates mood and symbolism with lighting. For example, in *The Blue One*, warm and bright southern sun illuminates Act I where new hope for healing and regaining stability after a shattering experience prevails. In Act II, the sunset turns to darkness as the protagonists encounter difficulties. Act III, the moment of facing the truth dawns on a cold gray misty morning. In this play, as in *Bonfire*, realistic lighting and sound effects are used as objective correlatives. In *The Blue One*, radio music and news broadcasts alternately reflect the protagonists' moods as they shift from tensely down-to-earth to dreamily enthusiastic.

Nearly all the plays, without being musicals, incorporate singing: folkloric, popular, classical; solo or group; reading of poetry (*The Blue One*, *Waiting*); displaying of paintings or other pictorial art (water color in *Otilia*; rare stamps in *Bonfire*; architecture and photography in *Portrait*; wood-carving in *The Blue One*; tapestry in *Waiting*).

## Ideology

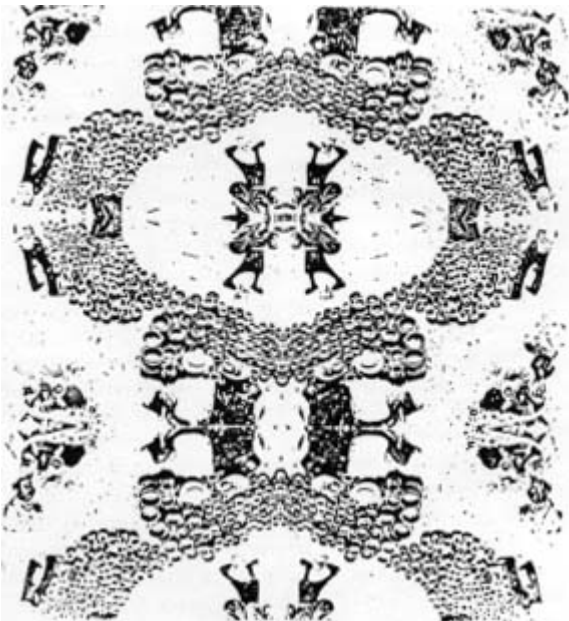
What ideology, what value system can one expect to find in an accomplished and popular contemporary soviet dramatist? Is it not necessary to pay tribute to the official doctrine to achieve success in the arts?

Fortunately Gunārs Priede's plays are not marred by observance of such restrictive guidelines. His plays remain areligious and apolitical; there is no overt social criticism of institutions. Yet, the values exposed in the plays constitute a coherent corpus. In the absence of adherence to an organized religion or ideology, what gives Priede's characters' lives meaning is a devotion to the family and its larger extension, the nation. His oldest characters are most fully committed to this ideal, and therefore are the protagonists. It follows that Priede's young characters are portrayed as searching commitment. They are led to this ideal under the guidance of loving and self-sacrificing mature individuals. Priede shows both positive and negative examples in women's roles *vis-a-vis* their children and careers; the responsibility of spouses to each other and to their offspring; the necessity to put down roots, to work for the common goal; self-realization through constructive work; and last but not least, the all-important role the arts play in preserving and furthering family and national traditions.

Priede does not glorify the family and the arts in a chauvinistic manner. On the contrary, he advocates tolerance of other nationals and their ways. In *The Blue One*, his protagonists' attitude toward their Georgian neighbors is more than friendly: it is admiring. Their singing and guitar playing is praised as well as their beautiful folk songs. In *Bonfire*, Priede tries to dispel the apparently deep-seated prejudice against gypsies.

The family and the upholding of national traditions seems to have a philosophical meaning for Priede. It is through them that man finds a positive identity, his place in the world, his particular relationship with other members of the human family. In *The Blue One*, Rasma enjoys a warm relationship with her Georgian neighbors because they respect each other with all their national differences. On the other hand, Priede mocks hippies as pitiful in their chosen rootlessness.

In conclusion, from Gunārs Priede's theater there emerges an ideal society whose members find fulfillment and happiness in direct proportion to their commitment to the safeguarding of the family through the honoring of the work ethic and national traditions through the cultivation of the arts. As a dramatist, Priede shows great mastery in integrating various aspects of stagecraft — set, lighting, sound — into the very fabric of the action. Although the subject matter is Latvian, particularly in the comedies, the action of his tragic dramas extends beyond his native land. The psychic struggles they represent are universal, and their overall tone and conception echo those of Greek tragedy.



*Danguolē Variakojis*

1 As reported by Mrs. Erika Petersons after her visit to Soviet Latvia in September, 1975.

2 Venta Vigante, *Cilvēks sākas ar atbildību*, Riga: Liesma, 1973.

3 Artūrs Vilks, *Lugas*, Riga: Liesma, 1973.

4 Referred to henceforth as *Waiting*.

5 Referred to henceforth as *Portrait*.

6 Referred to henceforth as *Otilia*.

7 Stage directions, Act II.