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The Golden Steed

Alfreds Straumanis, Ed.

The Golden Steed. Edited by Alfreds Straumanis. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1979. 393 pages, photographs. \$15.00.

This anthology is the second volume in a series on Baltic drama edited by Alfreds Straumanis of the Theatre Department, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; it is preceded by **Confrontations With Tyranny**, a collection of six Baltic plays published in 1977. **The Golden Steed** is the title of the first play, written in 1909 by the Latvian poet and patriot Janis Rainis, who called it a "winter solstice tale in five acts" (p. 43). Anna Brigadere's **Maija and Paija**, "A Fairytale in Seven Scenes," (1921) also contributes to Latvian lore. Estonian drama is represented by Oskar Luts' one-act plays **The Spirit of Lake Ulemiste** (1916) and **The Will O' The Wisp** (1919); August Kitzberg's **The Werewolf** (1912), a realistic drama portraying early 19th century peasant life. The two Lithuanian selections are the most recent: **The Village of Nine Woes**, "a narrative drama with music" by Kazys Saja, 1974, and **Whitehorn's Windmill**, the dramatization of a novel written by Kazys Boruta in 1945.

The Golden Steed is intended to "introduce the reader to as many Baltic folkloric motifs as possible" (p. 17) — to some of the essential, perhaps timeless, qualities of Baltic culture — and it does so like a rainbow radiating color, poetically. In addition, the book presents vivid dramatic action, ushered in by Antins' adventure to the top of the glass mountain in the first play, terminated by the disappearance of Girdvainis' extraordinary white dappled horses and, finally, Thunder god striking the devil "with a fire arrow into the depths of hell" (pp. 378-79). Each play in the volume is either based entirely on folklore, for instance, legends, fairy tales, superstitions; or it incorporates elements of traditional myth and ritual to enhance setting, action, and character. Songs and proverbs embellish ordinary language throughout. The interchange between folklore and dramatic invention is most striking, although at first least evident, in Saja's play, where it is difficult to distinguish between mythological figures and real characters; proverbial wisdom blends with earthy humor; and "Dainava," the legendary land of songs, comes to life as "The Village of Nine Woes."

References to folklore and mythology are elucidated in the introductory essays for each play by scholars who are familiar with Baltic literature and traditions: Andre Šedriks, Vaira Vikis-Freibergs, Felix J. Oinas, Eglė V. Žygas, and Elena Bradūnas. Indeed, their essays increase the reader's appreciation of the dramatic subject matter and means of expression. For example, Elena Bradūnas explains how folklorists distinguish between two major types of narratives, fairy tales and legends:

. . . One type was the fairy tale, which carried the listener out of his normal everyday life and set him down in a fantasy world to meet with kings and queens and to witness bouts with dragons that rescued stolen princesses. The stories always had happy outcomes often ending with a wedding scene where the lowly hero would win his princess . . .

The other major category of narratives consisted of legends. The stories were set in the real everyday world of the people who told them, and the characters were ordinary human beings who become special because they witnessed unusual and strange occurrences. Often legends recounted how mortal men met with various supernatural beings . . . They told of how gods, saints, devils, and other imps . . . meddled in human affairs, sometimes causing good, sometimes evil . . .

(Introduction to **Whitehorn's Windmill**, p. 329).

Most of the plays in **The Golden Steed** can be discussed generally in these terms.

Oskar Luts' **The Will O' The Wisp** recalls the ancient love story of Hero and Leander as well as its Northern European variants. **The Spirit of Lake Ulemiste** is an original interpretation of the Estonian legend "Why Will Tallinn Never Be

Completed?" (p. 188) concerning a near-by lake which is anxious to inundate the capital city. These short plays were intended as entertainment for young people.

Whitehorn's Windmill is like a legend in its juxtaposition of real setting and supernatural phenomena, but it is Kazys Boruta's own story; it is itself a legend. Baltaragis ("Whitehorn"), his vivacious daughter Jurga, Girdvainis are almost as familiar among Lithuanians as the folkloric archetypes pertaining to their companions: the matchmaker, the hypocritical old maid, and the devil. The author's particular devil, Pincukas, is twice notorious, and is known not only from the drama and the novel but also from a recent film made in Soviet Lithuania, "Velnio Nuotaka" ("The Devil's Bride" or, possibly, "The Devil's Disappearance").

The two Latvian plays relate to fairy tales. **The Golden Steed** is based on the Estonian variant of "The Princess on the Glass Mountain." **Maija and Paija** follows the structure of the cycle of tales about the Step-daughter and the True Daughter. Both are beautiful elaborations of the conflict between good and evil, centering in one play on the confrontation between Mother of Night and Father of Light; in the other, on Maija and the devil's influence. On one level they are plays for children, offering swift action and an array of exaggerated, colorful characters. They are, however, thought-provoking and sophisticated in their allegory.

The rescue of Princess Saulcerite ("Hope of the Sun") from many years of sleep, from the Rich Prince, and the Ravens attendant on Mother of Night is achieved in such a way by Antins, the hero of **The Golden Steed**, that it might be interpreted as a national event, and Saulcerite as a symbol of Latvia's independence. Anna Brigadere's Maija may be compared with Everyman of Medieval drama in that good deeds lead her to the discovery of the crown of the golden oak and enable her to reach Laima's ("Fate's") heavenly meadow. Or she may be perceived as Good Deeds, ever faithful to Doright as she traverses nine layers of the underworld and climbs ". . . from shoot to shoot, from leaf to leaf, from bloom to bloom" (p. 147) on the beanstalk provided by Mossfellow.

August Kitzberg's **The Werewolf** turns away from the world of fairy tales and approaches the psychological realism associated with Ibsen and Strindberg in 20th century theatre. The play is unique in this anthology for its sensitive treatment of superstition, specifically the folklore about werewolves prevalent among early 19th century peasants in Estonia. Kitzberg shows the negative effect of myth on a village and the inhabitants of Tammaru Farm. In the climactic scene, a celebration of St. John's Eve, songs and dances cease, and the traditionally luminous bonfire is extinguished by gossip echoing superstitious beliefs and ignorance.

The Village of Nine Woes, by Kazys Saja, is blessed with Aleliumas, a folkloric sage who plays the national instrument, *kanklės*, and the protagonist of this "narrative drama with music." The Village is cursed by Clement the ox, a devil in disguise with affinities to the mythical "aitvaras," as noted in Egle Žygas' excellent introduction. The action of the play is accompanied by songs: lyrical songs, humorous songs, an insulting game song, a lament, a recruit song, love songs, and songs of the wedding ritual (p. 274). Lyricism gives way to Clement, and to comic relief when the villagers appear with pots over their heads in a protective gesture against the beast. Thus visual effects complement music as wisdom alternates with folly in the provocative language of this play.

In summary, **The Golden Steed** ranges in style from realism to allegory to musical theatre. Its content is characterized by a diversity that is inherent in and suggests the main theme: humanity, as expressed in Baltic folklore and understood by individual authors. The majority of the plays were written in the early 20th century since the study of folklore became more organized in the late 19th century and has held interest over the years. By contrast, the first volume of the Baltic drama series, **Confrontations With Tyranny**, presents six recent plays which focus on the theme of tyranny — political, social, personal, even metaphysical — so relevant in the 20th century to the Baltic countries and beyond. Thanks to the remarkable achievement of the translators and to the initiative of Professor Alfreds Straumanis, this series is available to the English reader.

One may notice a discrepancy between the Editor's Introduction (p. 15, par. 1) and Felix J. Oinas commentary on Oskar Luts' plays (pp. 189-90); and typographical errors, which seem to proliferate in the second half of the edition. These are certainly minor shortcomings, inspiring attentive reading, as well as enjoyment of **The Golden Steed**.

Both volumes of the Baltic drama series are distributed by Waveland Press, Inc., P.O. Box 400, Prospect Heights, Illinois, 60070; (312) 634-0081.

Živilė Gimbutas