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The Attitude Towards the Fairy Tale in the Contemporary Puppet Theatre^[1]

Abstract: Apart from the exceptional attractiveness to a child of the fairy-tale and the puppet, the puppet theatre and the fairy-tale have certain other characteristics in common: the personages are not psychologically nuanced, the motivation is simple and unambiguous, both utilise the epic principle, while supernatural phenomena are shown as being completely natural. The miracles that are quite normal in the fairy-tale can also be shown equally normally on the puppet stage. It follows that the puppet theatre is an excellent medium for presentation of the fairy-tale. That being so, it is not at all surprising that the fairy-tale, even today, is produced on the stage by almost all the professional and amateur puppet theatres. However, the fairy-tale is often shown in adaptations in which their real significance and all their more profound meaning are lost. They are often submitted to forceful actualisation and ostensible modernisation, as if the laws of the psyche are not eternal and unchangeable. But truly contemporary presentation of the fairy-tale does not lie in bullying changes to what is eternal but in the use of modern means of expression.

Keywords: fairy-tale, puppet, puppet theatre, children's literature, stylisation, archetype

Life perhaps is not a fairy tale, but the fairy tale definitely helps us to learn how to live. In the era before science, at the time of their coming into being, myths, legends, fairy tales and similar forms were the only way of shaping and comprehending reality.^[2] However, today too, the fairy tale offers a profound insight into psychological and spiritual truths, and they remain unchangeable.

Bruno Bettelheim, a representative of the Freudian school, said:

In all these and many other respects, of the entire "children's literature" – with rare exceptions – nothing can be so enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale. (...) more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension.^[3]

Marie-Louise von Franz, a representative of the Jungian school, pointed out the following benefits of the fairy tale:

Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes. (...) They represent the

archetypes in their simplest, barest, and most concise form. (...) In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material. But in fairy tales there is much less specific conscious cultural material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly.^[4]

The fairy tale has universal meaning:

For us the study of fairy tales is very important because they depict the *general human basis*. They are especially important if one analyzes people from the other end of the world; if a Hindu or an Australian walks into the consulting room of a European analyst who has only studied his own myth, he will not find a human bridge to the analysand. If, however, the analyst has the knowledge of the basic human structures, he will be able to contact him. I have read of a missionary in the South Sea Islands who says that the simplest way to contact those people is by telling them fairy tales. It is a language in which each understands the other. If he told some big myth, that would not work so well. He has to use the basic material in its simple form because that is the expression of the most general and, at the same time, basic human structure. Because the fairy tale is beyond cultural and racial differences, it can migrate so easily. Fairy tale language seems to be the international language of all mankind – of all ages and of all races and cultures.^[5]

In its antiquity, universal nature and closeness to the child, the fairy tale is similar to the puppet theatre. Just as it has been present from the earliest childhood of the human race, the puppet is also present from the beginning of our lives as individuals. The child grows up with it and learns from it. A child's encounter with a puppet in the theatre is like an encounter with a very best friend. The puppet is suitable for staging the most diverse content, including an important place for that very fairy tale. Apart from both being close and dear to the child, the fairy tale and the puppet theatre have other points of contact:

- the personages are not psychologically sketched characters but are instead types – unambiguous, set and unchangeable;
- the motivation is simple and unequivocal, basic and archetypal;
- both the fairy tale and the puppet theatre make use of symbols and stylisation;
- both use the epic principle;
- supernatural phenomena are shown as being completely natural.^[6]

The puppet theatre is a theatre of metaphor and symbols, while "fairy tales speak to us in the language of symbols representing unconscious content",^[7] says Bruno Bettelheim and adds:

Although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable, they are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door when out on a walk in the woods. Even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales.^[8]

That sort of thing can be shown successfully only in the puppet theatre and in animated films. In that theatre, people, animals, plants and objects are made of the same material and all belong to the same world. A princess and a dragon and a cat and a tree and a house in the puppet theatre all have the same capability of speech, movement, feelings and mutual communication. Just as they do in the fairy tale. Supernatural events can be shown as being quite natural in the puppet theatre. A pumpkin can change without any problems into a coach, a mirror can answer questions, seven-league boots can master great distances, bean-stalks can grow up to the sky, and a little girl and her grandmother can emerge unscathed from the tummy of a wolf.

The puppet theatre is a specific type of theatre. The puppet is deprived of mimicry, while its gestures have a limited range. From the beginning to the end of the show, the puppet has the same appearance that is set once and for all time. Its immobile face does not bear many words: the plot is set in motion by action and not by dialogue or a monologue. It will not present moral dilemmas, or show the feelings and reactions that are shown by all human beings. As in the fairy tale,

if you take a classical fairy tale such as the Brothers' Grimm *Golden Bird*, there the hero has no such feelings. If a lion comes toward him, he takes his sword and kills it. Nothing is said about his being frightened and shivering and then putting his sword down the lion's throat and scratching his head and asking himself what he had done. Because he is a hero, he just naturally kills the lion. So Lüthi says that the hero in a fairy tale is an abstract figure and not at all human. He is either completely black or completely white, with stereotyped reactions: he redeems the lady and kills the lion and is not afraid of the old woman in the woods. He is completely schematic.^[9]

An actor cannot show such a personage. An actor needs psychological motivation in order to build up a character. And that cannot be offered to him by a fairy tale. Stanislavski's principle that, when playing a good person, an actor has to seek out where he is evil, while when playing the role of an evil person he has to seek out where he is good, simply does not hold for the fairy tale.

The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent – not good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between. One brother is stupid, the other is clever. One sister is virtuous and industrious; the others are vile and lazy. One is beautiful, the others are ugly. One parent is all good, the other evil.^[10]

A witch is evil simply because she is evil, and not because she was mistreated in childhood. There is no need to look for justification or

psychological motivation in fairy tale characters. They are as they are. An impoverished woodcutter is simply an impoverished woodcutter with two children, and it is not important whether he has lost his property through gambling or drinking to excess, whether he is a loser who was never able to accumulate anything anyway, or whether the king has something against him because the queen has cast a favourable eye on him.

In a situation when a father and a mother (even if she is a step-mother) lead the children off into the woods and abandon them to certain death, it is difficult to find realistic motivation. However,

the fairy tale expresses in words and actions the things which go on in children's minds. In terms of the child's dominant anxiety, Hansel and Gretel believe that their parents are talking about a plot to desert them. A small child, awakening hungry in the darkness of the night, feels threatened by complete rejection and desertion, which he experiences in the form of fear of starvation. By projecting their inner anxiety onto those they fear might cut them off, Hansel and Gretel are convinced that their parents plan to starve them to death!^[11]

Therefore, why look for a realistic motivation where there should not be one? By the same token, why should one want the puppet to express something when it is not a matter of it not being able to, but simply not wishing to? One cannot speak of the puppet's limitations and its shortcomings (because it has both shortcomings and advantages) but simply of its differences, of the specificities of the puppet theatre. Obratsov, who knew the puppet as few did and who entered into its essence, stated this very succinctly: "If there is a drama that can be played by people, it does not necessarily have to be played by the puppet."^[12]

However, the puppet can perfectly present the fairy tale. We do not expect the puppet to have a name and a surname, a date and place of birth, parents, kinfolk, friends and a residential address. But since the fairy tale does not offer a realistic background or psychological nuances by which the actor builds the character, the puppet is exceptionally suitable for that genre as a means of expression, because it is a sign, a stylisation, an archetype, reducing certain characteristics while enhancing others. Therefore, giving a realistic interpretation to the personages in a puppetry fairy tale is to miss the mark completely.

When one takes into account the attractiveness to a child of the fairy tale and the puppet, together with the suitability of the puppet theatre in presenting the fairy tale, it is not at all surprising that, even today, fairy tales continue to be played on the stages of almost all professional and amateur puppetry theatres.

Data on Croatian puppet theatres show that five permanent public puppet theatres and nineteen informal, private and amateur companies gave a total of 150 first nights over five seasons, of which 47 were based on traditional and authored fairy tales, making up almost one third of repertoire. It is indicative that one particular private theatre had four first nights in one season, and all four were fairy tales! And that's no wonder, because private theatres have to struggle to bring in audiences, and the mere title of a fairy tale attracts those audiences to the theatre.

The time is past when fairy tales were banned because 'new' educators feared that children would lose their sense of reality and expect some good fairy to solve their problems. However, the need has not passed for the fairy tale to be modernised, while this is often carried out in the wrong way.

Most children now meet fairy tales only in prettified and simplified versions which subdue their meaning and rob them of all deeper significance – versions (...) where fairy tales are turned into empty-minded entertainment.^[13]

A fairy tale that is recounted or written does, of course, differ from the staged fairy tale. Transposing one media to another does demand certain modifications.

Speaking of "the reshaping of the fairy tale model in Serbian drama literature for children", as the subtitle of his book reads, Milivoje Mladenović establishes the general feature of plays for children that have emerged from reshaping fairy tales. Almost all of them have a prologue, narrator or story-teller, whose function is to be the interpreter of the process of transposing the fairy tale into a play and establishing communication with the audience, usually in a humorous, comical manner and with an ironical or parodic drift. Fairy tale plays are often written in verse. The main characters retain their original names as in the fairy tale, while newly introduced personages are given names with parodic and ironical meaning, which produces comical effects. Generally speaking, introducing comical elements to the structure of a fairy tale play is a constant feature of these productions. The authors very often demand direct contact with the audience, which frequently has the function of emphasising "that reality differs from the reality that is treated in drama for children".^[14] In addition, a feature of the staged fairy tale is the expression of a moral – if possible, pooled with aesthetic values – and the idea of mitigating evil.^[15]

In an exaggerated yearning for modernity, audience approval and the authorial stamp, it often happens that fairy tales are shown in adaptations in which their real meaning and all more profound sense is lost. They are frequently subjected to forceful actualisation and ostensible 'updating', neglecting the fact that the laws of the psyche are eternal and unchangeable. Inexpert dramaturges and directors arbitrarily play with the fairy tale motifs, failing to take into account the age of their audiences, their lack of experience in life and their needs. They expose their young audiences to impoverished instant versions of fairy tales, throwing in events and personages from contemporary life, everyday politics, and stage and television programmes. Evil is not only sometimes modified; instead there is a very problematic presence of a relativisation of Good and Evil.

However, truly contemporary presentation of the fairy-tale does not lie in bullying changes to what is eternal but in the use of modern

means of expression. By using new visualisation and new technologies, accepting the rhythm of contemporary life while, in so doing, retaining the correct, most profound meaning of a work, it is possible to offer the child the fairy-tale with all the richness of its essence, which the child will itself be able to read off, taking from the fairy-tale what it needs.

The tendency in the puppet theatre to reject the puppet and to replace it with living actors, as well as contemporary adaptations of the fairy-tale into "events from life" and persiflage, show the inadequacy of the theatre creator to meet the deep needs of all child audiences (audiences, by the way, from which they live). The child has a right to the puppet and has a right to the fairy-tale! And indeed, has a right to them in unison: to the fairy-tale in the puppet theatre!

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[2] Cf.: Jolles, André *Jednostavni oblici (Simple Forms)*, Studentski centar Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb 1978.

[3] Bettelheim, Bruno *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* Vintage Books, New York 2010, p. 5.

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[8] Ibid, p. 37.

[9] Franz, Marie-Louise von op. cit., p. 17.

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