

Michael Chekhov

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"THE MOTHER": A FAIRY TALE BASED ON A THEME BY HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

CREATING THE FAIRY TALE PLAY

THE CHILD'S NEEDS

THE ACTOR'S CONTRIBUTION

DEATH AND BIRTH

WHAT LIES BEHIND THE SURFACE IN FAIRY TALES

OUR WORK WITH FAIRY TALES AN IMPORTANT BRANCH

OF OUR THEATER LIFE

Dr. Rudolf Steiner

CREATING THE FAIRY TALE PLAY:

The work on this fairy tale will be a little bit different from the work on other plays. We will elaborate it together: as a group we must create it as a performance; we must draw designs for the settings and costumes. We must approach it from the point of view of imagining it on the stage. We must be concerned about everything which has to do with it - not only with our own parts.

THE CHILD'S NEEDS:

This will help us to understand another thing which is very important. We will understand that the group which makes a performance for children approaches an unknown country. But we know many things through Dr. Steiner's investigation into the child's soul and education. He has given us many beautiful ideas.

One of these ideas is that it is impossible to penetrate into the child's soul if the actor is without knowledge and experience of the things he is going to perform. Grownups can be deceived by tricks and pretensions, but the child cannot accept such things. Therefore we have to know very much about all the events and characters in our fairy tale. We have to

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know much more than we will perform visibly; we have to know and experience much more than will be incorporated in the performance.

The atmosphere about each character and the atmosphere about the whole play must be saturated with our knowledge about such things. So from the very beginning I shall tell you about things which lie behind the things in the fairy tale - things which will flow as an aura around the performance; and that is what the children will really breathe in. Without this we will not create anything which will be digestible for children.

The idea to create fairy tale plays has been in my mind for over fifteen years, but only if they can be exceptional performances because of the atmosphere around them, and this great experienced knowledge. If our fairy tale cannot be performed with this background, then I will not continue the work because then it will be like any other children's performance - and that is not what the child needs.

We must approach the work absolutely humanly and seriously from the artistic point of view. The child sees and hears more than his parents think he is seeing and hearing. He sees and hears something which is the background of his parents' life and movements. The child sees behind it. Often when the parents are trying to instruct the child, the child does not understand what is told him - he hears something for himself. The life the child lives is not at all the life which his parents think is his. Therefore we have to be very careful of what is behind the images.

I cannot create this aura around you - you must help me. In modern education children are considered as if they are grownups. They are given grown-up thoughts of freedom, liberties, etc. This kills the child because the child looks behind these things. This grown-up approach has two results. Either it repulses the child terribly, because it is like a lie which the grownups spread; and the child becomes terribly unbridled, becomes a little rogue trying to find its way out of this grown-up lie which is imposed on it. Or the child becomes terribly contracted and reserved. When they become little rogues, their negative side is developed. (Later in his life the child may get better conditions which will help him to overcome the effects of these mistakes.)

The result of such development is that the young person will accept every lie, not because he wants to lie but because he will become deaf to what is right and what is wrong. This lying is the most killing thing for the social life. Therefore our work with fairy tales must be considered as one of the most important branches of our theatre life because it is not only artistically important, but humanly important.

THE ACTOR'S CONTRIBUTION:

If you will give children the possibility to breathe behind the fairy tale, it will be a real breath for them. If the child has the food or air for his ability to see behind things, then his super-conscious begins to breathe, and this breathing alone is already something which is our contribution to the future social life. If you understand it from this

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social, philosophical point of view, then we will really feel that we are doing something worth while. This is the difference between our other performances, in which we appear more as artists. This branch of our work which is art and something more - this is our contribution to the future social life. It is something more than education.

In the humorous fairy tale the psychology is just the same. There are also profound truths, but they will not kill the humor; they will add to it. The principle remains the same and, therefore, you must try to get and digest certain truths which we have to discover.

"THE MOTHER"

CHARACTERIZATION:

Death: There are many different kinds of death, and all of them are right because it depends upon which point of view we look at it - which side of death we see and under which circumstances death appears. We must not think that death is something fixed and definite. It is just as many-sided as anything else. For instance, from one point of view death may appear as a certain composition of bones, a skeleton - this is right and true from a certain aspect. From another aspect it appears like a mighty angel being - this is also right. From another aspect death is God the Father Himself - He has created everything, even death. He is Death himself from a certain high point of view.

Another image of death can be that of a wise old com-

forting hand; and this is the image which we will take in our fairy tale - death as the wisdom of life. If life were to go on indefinitely, it would be without rhythm, without change. The wisdom of death is that it makes the accents in life. Death is the rhythm, the wisdom of life - it is something which makes the life live - life must be stopped in order that one may live again. There is nothing threatening or bad in this concept of death. It is the transition to the new life - and this is given in our fairy tale.

Death is old because he is eternal. Old age, for the child, is always something like an experience which comes from far, far away and is here. For the child it is, as it were, eternity - something that happened before . . . before . . . before - the result of something which is behind. Therefore, Death must be old and wise and very clever, and maybe smiling. That is the quality which will give the children the feeling of the future. If we are able, like children, to look behind we will get the impression that it comes from far away - from the eternal something which has happened. At the moment when Death becomes sly, the children will see that there is a future, because Death knows something of the future. So we must combine this wise, old, and lovingly sly gentleman; then we will show the child that when death comes, it does something wisely, and then goes to continue the life but not to stop it. We must meditate on this. We must know all the slightest nuances in it and behind it. An old, wise, and a little bit sly figure.

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The outer appearance will come if you will imagine it inwardly as something which passes through the world and conducts the life with this rhythm. With this rhythmical feeling for the Death, I think we will find what is given in the fairy tale. When Death says, "I am always walking, walking over the earth," he means he never stops walking, moving. Therefore it is very important to know how he walks over the stage, how he makes accents on the earth so that each moment will be rhythmical. Try to elaborate Death's feet, which may be very big and soft.

The Grave Woman and the Half-way House: In the fairy tale there are definitely three worlds through which the Mother passes. The first is our world as it is - the dying child, the human sorrow. Then the child begins to die, and the Mother crosses the threshold to the second world which is nearest to us, the world before the human being gets higher into the new life. Here he has to put off his things which he used on the earth: His body, his other body and his third body - then his "I Am" is free and goes into the garden. This is the half-way station, as it were - it is not yet full death, and it is not yet the life. It is the place where we "change horses."

We must know this, but the child must not have this knowledge. It would be a great mistake and even dangerous to impose Anthroposophy on the child. The child does not need it because they are Anthroposophists themselves, and must be shown the world as it is. But we must know what is behind things, so that we can give the child the right images, the right interpre-

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tation and the right situations, but not knowledge of these different worlds. We must know it and create an aura around us, but not impose on the child the knowledge of these things.

When a person dies, all the elements come to him. First they take his body. The earth element comes and tears the body to pieces - the process of decay, when the body loses its form and begins to disappear. All the chemical and physical powers which govern the earth take the hard parts of the body and tear them to pieces. They cannot come in and tear them before death comes because there are other powers in us while we are living which keep all these things together. When this power is gone and the person dies, the process immediately begins. The water power takes all the liquid, and the air power the air, and the warmth takes the warmth, and the body disappears.

And all this is the half-way work. That is why the Grave Woman always works with roots. Her business is only to tear things to pieces. All the elemental beings are concerned with this tearing: elfs, gnomes, salamanders, nymphs, are all tearing our bodies to pieces. The gnomes tear the hard parts, the undine takes the water from us, the sylphs take the air, and the salamander the warmth.

The Grave Woman represents the whole lot of these half-conscious beings, half-beings, and half-way things. So our physical body disintegrates. The half-clever, half-humorous quality of the Grave Woman is right because these beings have humor; and human beings are much more stupid than they are, although these are lower standing beings. They have a tremendous-

ly developed intellectual power, and they are everywhere in us, and through us, and always laughing at us because they are so much more clever than we are. This is somehow in the character of the Grave Woman. There is a certain irony and an attempt to be something. All this is true and expressive of that which lies behind her.

So the Greenhouse and the Grave Woman represent the process of dying. The process of taking off the things from the human being, things which must be left here on earth in order to free the human being to go higher. And this is something which we have to meditate on. Always someone is coming and someone is going, but where no one knows. This will justify this feeling of no end. The station where souls are passing and passing. You will find a kind of listening, looking, guessing, and crying and laughing, because it is something which she ^(the Mother) can penetrate. When she exchanges her hair with that of the Grave Woman, the Mother does so because she feels perhaps she will understand something more if she has made this exchange. And when Death asks her where her hair is, she has nothing to say because she has tried, by this means, to get more knowledge than was allowed her. And the sky with the doors and windows always peeping through.

The process of dying, ~~the~~ the fairy tale, begins earlier. To us death seems to happen swiftly and the person dies immediately. But this is not so. The person really begins to die after thirty-five years of age - all the processes in the body die. Up to thirty-five it is a process of accumu-

lating something, and then the life begins to go out. So death begins long before we think it does; and when the person dies, it is only one of the accents which is very obvious to us.

Actually, the person does not die at all when he loses the ability to "see" and "feel" with the physical parts. He begins to live with a different consciousness. Hunger comes and the desire to drink. All these processes still remain because they don't lie in our physical, but in our etheric body. The process of dying is going on, and after a certain number of days - three, four, or five - this other body disperses. If we were gnomes, we would say that the person dies then, because gnomes see this process with different eyes. There is another element in us that dies much later; and then the freed kernel of the human being, which never dies, is free from all these half-way stations and the new life begins.

So the process of dying is a very slow one. In our fairy tale it starts with the Mother sitting at the cradle - then the frozen flower - then the process of dying is going on, and the Grave Woman shows us her business; and Death finishes in our fairy tale when it takes the flower and disappears into the windows of the sky. That is the end of the death.

But at the moment when Death takes the child into the third world, which is the garden - at the moment when Death disappears with the child, life begins again and the Mother gets the feeling of new life. So the whole fairy tale is the process of dying, and then the new life starts; and that is the psychological gesture of the whole play. Death is the

great musician and composer, not the destroyer.

As with the process of dying, so it is with birth. The child is not born with its first breath, but the process of being born starts long, long before - even before the parents come together. From the spiritual world in which the "I Am" wants to be born, it chooses its parents before they know one another. The "I Am" is free to look at the earth and to choose from it those parents which will give it the inheritance which is most suitable for it. This is the beginning of the process of being born. We see our parents coming together and living together; and at the moment of conception that is the moment when we actually send ourselves into this bodily process, which is the preparation for our physical birth. We must wait nine months, and there is a great deal to be done. We plunge into this germ and lose our cosmic consciousness and appear on earth as a crying thing.

And the process of birth goes on. All our childhood diseases are a great fight with the inherited qualities. To strive and to find the way - that is our purpose and that is why we must forget and lose any memory of what went on before birth. The child must go through certain diseases, which means they are working on the body. Each disease has its own meaning. This is the process of accumulating the body.

Without this background of material all the fairy tales will become just ordinary, flat performances. We must plunge into this world. And if we will get more and more knowledge of this background, it will be something which will be around us, and the child will assimilate it. That is our aim.