

## **The Class Play as Fever**

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The class play is a microcosm of the whole school year, but it has its own process, which resembles a fever process in the organism. A fever warms the organism, making it more flexible, even to the level of the physical body. During the fever, the human being is more open through the working of the soul/spiritual world and to the higher self. When the fever passes, this openness remains for a short time and new realizations are possible. For children, of course, this process is not conscious.

Some time in the autumn or early winter the teacher often gets an idea of which story will best capture the work for that year, to be performed as a play in the spring. The first intimations hint at what the story should be, even of elements or pieces of text that should be part of the play. Then, the process requires quite a time of warming and shaping before the climax of the actual performance in the energy and activity of the meeting between the performers and the audience. Afterwards, the children consolidate the enlivened story and bring it to a new depth in which the whole school year goes into the child.

Each year links to the next through the class plays. When my older daughter graduated from eighth grade, I gave a speech, as her teacher, in which I went back in sequence over all the elementary grades describing the different roles she had taken in our class plays. We have had school at home with the Waldorf curriculum since kindergarten, and each year culminated in a play performed with other families, directed by me. Looking back over the years of teaching my

daughter, what stood out for me were certain images from her class plays – who and how she was in them.

In Kindergarten, she was Cinderella who sweetly prayed to her mother and called to the birds for help. When the slipper, small and dainty and all golden, fit only her foot, this was a moment of rightness – a confirmation of what she knew was right.

In First Grade, she was Snow White who had to face the evil of the witch and be tempted by the apple. She overcame the poisoned apple, and shone as she was awakened by the kiss of the prince. She loved her beautiful white dress!

In Second Grade, she was St. Claire, spiritual sister to St. Francis. Now roses enter the picture: When people opposed St. Claire's work, it was confirmed by the miracle of roses blooming in winter. My daughter knew just how to set the altar in the chapel. And when the play was over she spontaneously gave a red rose to every person in the audience, including them all in the miracle.

Third Grade called for the Paradise Play – one of the Oberufer Plays from Medieval times. We shortened the scenes and used simple chanting-style music. Here the apple appears again. My daughter played Eve, who took the fruit too early, the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, but she bit into it with conviction, showing that she had the necessary inner resources. When the Angel drove her from the garden, she looked back at the Angel, and when the angel said, “I shall recall you late and slow,” my daughter turned and went on with a look of determination – yes, she would come back.

Fourth Grade brought the Norse myths and the role of Ilmarinen, the immortal blacksmith of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. Here she faced a witch again. This time she was instructed to forge the golden Sampo, the magical artifact that brought health and prosperity, which was, however,

ultimately lost and broken. Working to bring these imaginations to life in the play with her best friend seemed to forge something strong and lasting between them.

Fifth Grade moves into the ancient cultures and our play that year was the Greek myth of Pandora. Several strong moments in this play stand out: the awakening of Pandora as Athena breathed life into her; the temptation of the chest brought by Epimetheus and its opening, which allow evils to fly out into the world; and, finally, the moment of determination as, once again, she decided to stay and fight and work her way back, saying:

*Of wounds and sore defeat  
I made my battle stay.  
Winged sandals for my feet  
I wove of my delay.  
Of weariness and fear  
I made my shouting spear.  
Of loss and doubt and dread  
I made a helmet for my head  
And a floating plume.*

- Ralph Vaughn Moody

Sixth Grade brought the story of St. Paul, his biography and his encounter outside Damascus. Now roses have a part again – it was on the road to Damascus that Saul, in air perfumed and pervaded with the essence of rose, had his spiritual meeting and became Paul. In the role of Paul, my daughter lived into the radical transformations of his life and his firmness in carrying out his life work. The armor this time was the armor of God in which Paul instructed the Ephesians:

*Stand fast, girded about the loins with truth  
Put on the breastplate of the higher life  
Which fulfills our human destiny.*

*Shoe your feet with preparedness  
to spread the message of peace that comes from the angels.*

The story of Joan of Arc was portrayed in Grade Seven. There were so many moments from this play that it is difficult to choose among them: Joan seeing her angels in wonder and terror, crowning the king and calling for his uprightness, charging into the battle as an untrained girl. One of the most vivid moments, however, was the very end when a red rose remaining after the execution was given as a gift to all who witnessed the play.

In Grade Eight the play, a version of Goethe's *Magic Flute*, was much more complex. The culmination of all the plays of the lower school years, it deepened the curriculum work of that year as each of the other plays had over the years, but it also brought the student to the end of a phase, the end of the lower school... poised to enter high school.

### **Goethe's *Magic Flute*: A tale of transformation**

In 1795, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, as part of a group of alchemical tales, an opera fragment, which continued the story of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* from where the original libretto ended the tale. Goethe titled this work "The Magic Flute: A Comic Opera Fragment." Goethe did not find a composer for the music in his lifetime, and the opera fragment seems never to have been performed.

In the original libretto, the daughter of a wicked fairy queen is taken away by a good magician, Sarastro, for the child's benefit. The wicked fairy queen sends a portrait of her daughter to the hero, Tamino, the prince who rescues the maiden with the help of a magic flute. The daughter, Pamina, then marries the prince, and they are both crowned by the magician and become king and queen.

Goethe's sequel takes its inspiration from a moment in the original story when the evil Monostatos, unable to win Pamina's love, has joined forces with the evil fairy queen, the Queen of the Night. In Goethe's opera Monostatos returns and steals Pamina's and Tamino's child, Genius, and imprisons him in a golden sarcophagus, which, however, proves too heavy to lift. Monostatos then seals it shut with the Queen of the Night's seal. To this is added her curse: should Pamina and Tamino look at each other, they would go mad; and should they see their child, he would die. After the king and queen have succeeded in trials by fire and water, the story culminates with the reunification of the king and queen, and the liberation of Genius. In Goethe's fragment, the story stops here, but it does not end.

In order to transform this fragment into a play for Grade Eight in the Waldorf curriculum, I worked on connecting it to Mozart's *Magic Flute* and on providing a musical context for the scenes. An ending also had to be written to provide the closure that is necessary for children.

The initial setting for this new tale of the magic flute was presented by a narrator reading a prologue in the form of a poem written for the original *Magic Flute* by the well-known English poet W. H. Auden, which gives the general background to the story.

Queen Astrafiammante, she  
Long ruled the primal Night,  
In realms of dream had reigned supreme,  
Until there came the Light.  
...etcetera, continuing through the events of the opera

Then we presented in tableau, with the narrator reading the lines, the final scene of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. From there, we began *The Magic Flute: A Comic Opera Fragment*. We performed the work as a play, not an opera, but used new music composed by Channa

Seidenberg as a Prelude and Postlude. Setting pieces were played on lyre and silver flute for each scene.

The trials by fire and water, which the king and queen have to undergo in order to reach their imprisoned infant, were a challenge to present in a way that evoked the reality of the trial for the audience. Fire and water as elements are related to the ethers of warmth and tone, respectively. Marjorie Spock, a eurythmist, has developed movements for these ethers, which are particular variations on lemniscates. As two of her students performed these eurythmy movements, warmth first, and then tone, the king and queen moved through the same space. In the role of the queen, I experienced traveling forward through the whirling fire movement and backward through the expanding and contracting water. We both stood shoulder to shoulder through this, and I felt that it took great courage.

The final challenge was to provide an ending for the play. In Goethe's fragment, the child, Genius, flies off when threatened by the Queen of the Night's guards. The child is freed from the confines imposed by evil, but immediately flees. One can sense the presence of this child, but at a distance, not yet attained. Therefore, I added that the child reappears in the distance holding a candle, and the king and queen sense him, and begin to move toward him. The lines I wrote for them are based on a verse which Rudolf Steiner gave as a Whitsun verse<sup>22</sup>.

The final lines are spoken by the Queen and King as they see the light of their child in the distance:

Pamina: Put it to flight, the sleep  
that cloaks the forces  
of inner sight

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<sup>22</sup> *The Festivals and Their Meaning*, Ascension and Pentecost Whitsun, Lecture 6, June, 4, 1924, Dornach (Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1996).

with spirit-night.

Tamino: Fit the key to the lock  
inwardly: turn the outer to inner  
and begin to see  
the child waiting there,  
waiting patiently.

Both: Wait – we come to thee!

This play provided many new challenges to my eighth grader – a girl playing two lead men's roles. She was the handsome prince and father Tamino, as well as Papageno, a hilarious bird/human figure who countered the prince at every step until the critical moment when he provided crucial help. The element of humor in this play allowed everyone to breathe, play and listen. The golden sarcophagus in this story-play reaches, in some ways, back to the crystal coffin in Grade One's Snow White and to the golden Sampo in Grade Four. The crystal coffin shelters the sleeping princess, but she cannot leave it on her own. The coffin is passive, protective, and waiting. The Sampo, golden and active, giving out not keeping in, is lost and then found again in pieces. The coffin or sarcophagus in the Magic Flute also is golden, is lost and then found again. This time it is opened from the inside by a being already awake, Genius.

## **Conclusion**

Kindergarten through Grade Three stand in the timeless realm of imagination and myth, but the children can gradually be more active and involved in bringing alive the pictures of these stories through the work of preparing and performing a play. Beginning in Grade Four a new, more earth-oriented element enters. The children must come to understand, to grasp, and to

encompass the animal-, then the plant-, and then the mineral-world. The Norse Myths with their teachings about elementals provide pictures of animals; the Greek myths with their balanced flowing beauty show something of the quality of the plants; and the Roman period with its determination and emphasis on the law educates about the mineral qualities. From here, a turning begins and children are at one of the points wherein they look back to the spiritual world, although not yet in a conscious way. Medieval times bring an awareness of higher guidance for human actions. The next step is our modern challenge of developing individuality. Yet, this individuality needs guidance from a higher self, which it must begin to sense and seek, like the king and queen in Goethe's *Magic Flute*.

The Grade Eight play is the “fever of fevers.” In this final play, the collected achievements of the lower school plays are annealed and transformed – and no one is ever the same again.