

THE RITUAL OF THE ABSURD IN P.-E. RUMMO'S *THE CINDERELLA GAME*

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In a letter to his family, dated July 28, 1835, in Strasbourg, Georg Büchner writes of the political struggle of his day: "Three more refugees have drifted in here;... in Giesen two students were arrested again. I am extremely careful. Here we know of no one arrested on the border. History must be a fairy tale."¹ It is tempting to see Paul-Eerik Rummo's *The Cinderella Game* (1969), the most controversial and in the opinion of many critics the best play to come out of Soviet Estonia,² as a political allegory that uses (in the manner of a number of contemporary Eastern European plays) the fable of a well-known fairy tale to comment on recent history. However, such an interpretation carries with it dangers that go beyond literary criticism and the generally recognized pitfall of the intentional fallacy.

With these considerations in mind, I should like to propose a brief examination of ritualistic and mythic elements in *The Cinderella Game*. For much of the best drama of our time no longer concerns itself with social or political reform, but instead reveals man's gradual — and painful — awareness of his human condition. Such an archetypal movement toward a tragic perception characterizes all great drama from the Greeks on and may be the legacy of ancient myths and rituals. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has recently argued, "myths and rites are far from being, as has often been held, the product of man's 'myth-making faculty,' turning its back on reality." On the contrary, they constitute a kind of scientific method of observation and reflection and therefore "still remain at the basis of our own civilization." The major area in which these ancient forms flourish today is of course art, for art, according to Lévi-Strauss, 'has retained the element of "savage thought."³

It has been suggested that the almost universal fairy tale of the little cinder girl originated in a nature myth, in which Cinderella was the dawn, which was oppressed by the night clouds (cruel relatives) and was finally rescued by the sun (the prince).⁴ Thus we begin our examination of Rummo's *The Cinderella Game* with a cluster of overtones that conjure up the ancient ritual of seasonal change, of fertility, of death and resurrection, which lead to Euripides' *The Bacchae* and eventually to the off-Broadway production of *Dionysus in '69*. It might also be pointed out that the earliest surviving text of a "play," the so-called Egyptian Coronation Drama, which in all probability goes back to the time of the First Dynasty (ca. 3300 B. C.), contains the passion and revival of the king and the ultimate triumph of the young prince, the sun-god Horus.⁵

The fairy tale of Cinderella ends with a rebirth as the heroine moves literally from ashes to diamonds. Rummo's play begins where the fairy tale ends, but though the author introduces a number of characteristically twentieth-century concepts, which will be explored below, *The Cinderella Game* contains a symbolically structured death and resurrection, thus linking the work to the ancient ritual of Dionysus. Suffice it to say at this point that the secondary characteristics of what can loosely be termed as the Dionysiac, namely sexuality and violence, are in ample evidence in *The Cinderella Game*. That Rummo's play broke new ground for Estonian drama in this area is further suggested by the fact that several members of the original audience are on record as having yelled "Shame on the Estonian theatre" during the Prince's seduction scene.⁶

But how does Rummo make a shopworn fairy tale palatable to a modern audience? Among the many devices at his disposal are the use of ritualized *poésie de théâtre* and the injection of absurdist philosophy. Rummo does indeed depict a universe that is devoid of the familiar and the comprehensible. Instead of a storybook Cinderella and her Prince Charming, there are several pretenders to these titles. Furthermore, the Prince not only has a double but is simply one of the many princes who inhabit a multitude of castles that abound in the hostile countryside. Worse yet, there is no Fairy Godmother who could rush to the aid of the brutally assaulted Cinderella. And when the wicked Stepmother, an old woman in a wheelchair who represents life, produces some sheets of paper that are supposed to reveal "the rules of the game," no one is able to read the strange markings on the few pages that are not completely blank.

Like Oedipus, or Lear, or even Willy Loman, characters in Rummo's play ask, "Who am I?" The answer seems to be that they are simply puppets playing interchangeable roles in a meaningless game of charades. Rummo concretizes the idea of the absurdity of man's condition in a visually brilliant scene in which the Prince chases after the crazily wheeling Stepmother, while obstacles drop from the flies to impede his movement. It is at this point in the play that the Prince realizes the meaninglessness of his quest to unmask the real Cinderella, who has come to stand for truth and happiness. This tragic perception is dramatized by a shift from prose to blank verse and the literal opening up of the stage both in height and in depth, for until that moment most of the action has taken place in a single, as it were, almost exclusively linear dimension.

The production of *The Cinderella Game* at the "Vanemuine" Theatre in Tartu in February, 1969, underscored the elements of ritual and absurdity in the text. For Evald Hermaküla, who directed, has undoubtedly been influenced by Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Peter Brook. Consequently he turned Rummo's play into an exciting exercise in the methods of the theatre of cruelty. In the scene in which the Prince beats Cinderella, the agonizing depiction of violence brought gasps of "Enough, enough" from the audience.⁷ In the recognition scene, Hermaküla bared the stage to the extent of exposing the lighting system as well as all the visible stage machinery,⁸ but even this did not reveal any hitherto unknown secrets. For as even Soviet Estonian critics have observed in connection with Rummo's play, the ultimate truth may be that there is no ultimate truth.⁹

Rummo's universe is indeed frighteningly contemporary. But the playwright's world view is not nihilistic. For it is the element of play in *The Cinderella Game* that injects a significant note of meaning and order into an apparently meaningless and chaotic cosmos. As Johan Huizinga points out in his *Homo Ludens*,

in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter.... From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation.¹⁰

Thus one of the ways in which man could survive the absurdity of the universe would be to transform reality into a game. This, of course, is precisely what happens in so many modern plays. We have, for example, Ionesco's game of *The Lesson*. We have the game of killing Madame in Genet's *The Maids* and the game of seducing Julian in Albee's *Tiny Alice*. We have, furthermore, Beckett's *Endgame* and the game of *Waiting for Godot*. And now we have Rummo's *The Cinderella Game*.

The Cinderella game involves a ritualized quest for truth and for happiness. The rules of the game are made by one of the most important characters in the play, the Stepmother, and each of the other major characters, with the exception of the Prince, receives from her the orders for the day. Cinderella simply plays Cinderella. The First Stepsister flaunts her sensual charms. The Second Stepsister poses as a bluestocking. The Master of the House plays the "foolosopher." The Stepmother herself assumes the role of mother earth and points to the power of play: "Will not be old so long as I play. / In play resides my strength."¹¹ As the Prince puts it, "It seems that everyone is playing the role that was given to him some time ago, and everyone is content with his role."¹² The Prince's own role is that of the seeker, the quester, and in that respect he has been compared to Prince Hamlet.¹³ As we have seen, his quest to find the real Cinderella is unsuccessful. Rarely, if ever, does man find happiness or the ultimate truth. Thus it is reassuring to know that in a world as chaotic and bleak as the one depicted in Rummo's play, a certain amount of metaphysical comfort can be found in the seemingly controllable and fixed rules of play.

A similar state of mind probably explains early man's predilection for ritual. For what is ritual if not play. And primitive man undoubtedly played the serious game of nature's death and resurrection not only because he was afraid (which would have sent him into the farthest corner of his cave, there to perish) but also because in play his mind conquered, in Huizinga's words, "the absolute determinism of the cosmos." Because spring was slow in coming, man invented irrational play, which showed him a way out of the bitter cold and darkness of midwinter. As a character says in Rummo's play, "And then one draws the sword and sets out against the insane chaos of things, so as to win and conquer." And again, later, "Emptiness surrounds us; we must fill it again and again. Fear lurks in us; we must conquer it again and again."¹⁴ All that conquering is done, of course, by means of an arbitrary code, which some call "honor" or "courage" or "manhood," but which is basically a ritual and hence a form of play.

Hand in hand with play — at least in the contemporary theatre of the absurd — goes the concept of time. In *The Cinderella Game*, scenes one, two, and three begin with the ringing of an alarm clock, and there are numerous references to time throughout the play. The chief categories of performance time may be termed real time, play time, and symbolic time. The passage of real time during the "Vanemuine" production of *The Cinderella Game* involved roughly two and a half hours. Play time, however, lasts an entire day. It is five o'clock in the morning in the first scene, six A.M. in scene two, seven A.M. in scene three, and eight A.M. in scene four. Scene five takes place in the afternoon of the same day, and though all the clocks have rather mysteriously stopped in the last scene, the play ends in the evening. Symbolic time in *The Cinderella Game* takes in the better part of an entire lifetime, with the action of the play representing the journey of life, the archetypal quest, and man's final tragic perception that he is doomed to a life in which he will never find truth or happiness.

The Prince, having married Cinderella nine years ago, leaves his entourage and journeys alone to the former home of his wife. There he encounters a new Cinderella, whose foot seems to fit the slipper, but this is neither here nor there, for the shoe turns out to be a fake. Later, while he tries to discuss his quest with the Second Stepsister, he is lured into the warm bed of the First Stepsister. (This, by the way, is one of the cleverest scenes in the play, for the Prince, yielding to the seduction of his body as well as his mind, uses a single set of sentences to simultaneously carry on two separate conversations.) Both sisters remind the Prince of the girl in the kitchen. His problem is indeed complicated: with his wife, the Court-Cinderella, hard at his heels, which of the four girls is the real Cinderella? Though he has two probing talks with the Master of the House, the Prince fails to unravel life's motives for giving him the wrong girl — if, indeed, he did get the wrong girl — until he encounters the Stepmother, who reveals to him the absurdity of his quest.

In the last scene the Prince and Cinderella, like Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, talk about the passing of time:

PRINCE: What did you do here all the time?

CINDERELLA: Waited.

PRINCE: Is waiting an activity?

CINDERELLA: Waiting is very much an activity. One has to be rather active when one waits.

PRINCE: And what else did you do while you waited?

CINDERELLA: Waited some more.

PRINCE: And then?

CINDERELLA: Still more. And I baked beans. But I burned them.

PRINCE: They'll do.

(The Prince sits... and pitches beans into his mouth....)

CINDERELLA: But you?

PRINCE: What do you mean, I?

CINDERELLA: Prince.

PRINCE: Yes?

CINDERELLA: Yes. Prince. But what did you do all this time, Prince?

PRINCE: I? (He chokes on a bean. Cinderella slaps him on the back.) I didn't do even that. I neither baked nor waited.¹⁵

A few moments later the fire dies in the hearth, lighted ceremonial candles create a funereal atmosphere, and the Prince steps out of the warm room into a snow storm. Real time, play time, and symbolic time have all come to an end.

But have they? By definition, a prince is the son of a sovereign, just as the word "Dionysos" may mean "son of Zeus,"¹⁶ and as the curtain falls, the Stepmother, who has been identified with life, winds up the alarm clock and tells Cinderella about the ball to which she will go tomorrow. Man, having once more failed in his quest, may die, but life goes on, forever holding up the glittering promise of tomorrow.

As in the ancient myths of seasonal change, the winter of Rummo's discontent must sooner or later yield to the eternally recurring thaw of spring, and, as we recall an earlier speech by the Prince, the fear of (allegorical?) wolves will eventually be replaced by a feeling of Dionysian ecstasy:

February, February! The wolves smell you.... You, hungry, smell the thaw.... The wolves track you, you are on the trail of hope.... The thaw, the thaw. Where is the thaw? It must come.... Soon all the roads will crumble ... and the road-banks will crumble and the emaciated carcasses of wolves will crumble on the roads and on the road-banks.... You'll walk as if drunk. How everything will simply drip with joy!¹⁷

By endowing the action of *The Cinderella Game* with what at first appears to be an absurd cosmic happening but which soon develops into a meaningful and artful game, Rummo seems to be suggesting that though Dionysus may have been caught in the web of contemporary metaphysics, he can be released within each of us by means of ritualized play.

1 "From Georg Büchner's Letters," trans. Maurice Edwards, *The Tulane Drama Review*, VI (March 1962), 134.

2 See, for example, Üülo Tonts, "Sügise ja suve vahel," *Sirp ja Vasar*, June 27, 1969 and July 4, 1969; Karin Kask, "Juurdeütlemisi ja edasimõtlemisi," *Sirp ja Vasar*, July 25, 1969; and above all Jaak Rähesoo, "See maailm ja teised," *Looming* (1969, no. 7), p. 1093. Rähesoo's article is the most perceptive analysis of recent Soviet Estonian drama. For an overview of the field in English see Mardi Valgema, "Recent Developments in Soviet Estonian Drama," *Bulletin of the Institute for the Study of the USSR*, XVI (September 1969), 16-24.

3 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966, pp. 16, 219.

4 "Cinderella," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1958 ed.

5 Theodor H. Caster, *Thespis*, New York, 1961, pp. 80-81.

6 H. Kään, "Mäng," *Edasi*, April 13, 1969.

7 *Idem*.

8 L. Stolovitš, "Dialog Paul-Eerik Rummo 'Tuhkatriinu' puhul," *Noorus* (1969, no. 4), p. 48.

9 Ü. Matjus, "Maskita näod," *Looming* (1969, no. 5), p. 792.

10 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Boston, 1955, pp. 3-4. One of the first Soviet Estonian commentators to point out the play element in *The Cinderella Game* was Joel Sang, "'Tuhkatriinumängu' toetuseks," *Tartu Riiklik Ülikool*, March 14, 1969.

11 Paul-Eerik Rummo, *Tuhkatriinumäng*, Tallinn, 1969, p. 48. All translations from the Estonian are mine.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

13 See, for example, Matjus, p. 791 and Rähesoo, pp. 1091-1092.

14 Rummo, pp. 19, 42.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

16 Jaan Puhvel, "Eleuther and Oinoätis: Dionysiac Data from Mycenaean Greece," in Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., ed., *Mycenaean Studies*, Madison, Wisc.,

1964, p. 163.
17 Rummo, p. 7.