

Mystery Drama Productions in Spring Valley

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Category: Mystery Drama

An appreciation of the outstanding series of conference-plus-performances of Rudolf Steiner's mystery dramas, directed by Barbara Renold in Chestnut Ridge, NY

Note: the 2012 Conference is **July 18-22**, with the full performance on Saturday, July 21. Details are at www.threefold.org/guardian

Harmony—Without Stars

When a friend in New York, teaching at a parochial school, grew interested in Anthroposophy some years ago, I invited him to attend the Rudolf Steiner School's faculty-presentation of the Oberufer Paradise Play. Afterward, in addition to appreciating the profound meaning that the traditional script delivers to every age of life, and admiring the gentle way that the cast assimilated the audience to itself by wending through the aisles between scenes, my friend lamented that such a production would have been impossible to stage at the school in which he was working. Mistakenly speculating that the impediment would lie in some theologically heterodox element, or perhaps that the Nativity-story itself had somehow fallen out of favor with the Church, I asked why. "First of all," my friend sighed, "The administration never lets teachers do anything that doesn't originate from the head-office. But even if we got permission, every teacher would demand to be the Father-God. And if we performed it, every actor would be upstaging everyone else. In the end, there'd just be bad feelings all around. No, it would never work."

Fortunately, the very opposite dynamic proves regularly to be the case for the inclusive, high-quality community-theater productions for which the Threefold Community in Spring Valley, NY, has long enjoyed renown. Despite very different levels of acquaintance with Rudolf Steiner's mystery dramas—some actors arrive at the initial rehearsal having puzzled over the themes for years, while, even by show time, others are still barely conversant with the scenes in which they are cast—and despite various degrees of aptitude for drama, facility for memorizing lines, and mastery of stage-fright, these collaborations foster an exceptional degree of harmony throughout the complex preparation for presenting these chewy stories. Their unconventionally long trains of thought, and the long sentences and long clauses within them, require extra attention to follow their import in extended dialogues and monologues. While novices, serving in the wings as prompters ready to repair a missed cue or a flubbed line, are assigned the attentive study of each word and syllable as a convenient way to immerse themselves in the script, veterans punctuate rehearsals by rejoicing over the new connections they continually discover among characters.

Karma Is as Karma Does

In the past summer's production of *The Soul's Awakening*, Director Barbara Renold, Assistant Director Laurie Portocarrero, and some of the savvier actors in the cast provided entryways to dense passages of text through explications that helped us discover ourselves in the characters and themes: reactionaries and radicals subject to codependence and abandonment, souls torn between claims of loyalty to institutions vs. individual conscience vs. respect for law, the shock occasioned by unmasking carnal infatuation camouflaged in idealistic love, the burden of assessing moral failings among the accomplished—to the attentive student, these plays reveal not only karma, but *our* karma. By personifying natural powers, soul-faculties, and adversarial forces in forms as real as those of human beings, their supersensible dramaturgy prompts us to recognize spiritual beings operating within our lives. Steiner's depiction of individuals' metamorphosis across lifetimes, and the thirst of each Higher Self to rectify past-lives' wrongs, aid our self-knowledge by stretching our ability to think ourselves into guises alien to the familiar selves we know. Nor must we exclude the possibility that participants in the production might be negotiating analogous dramatic conflicts in their daily encounters with one another,

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for our very days are themselves mystery dramas awaiting our elevation to earn the insights that they guard.

Laurie Portocarrero framed our rehearsals with warm-ups and full-blown workshops based on Michael Chekhov's method for training actors, a method itself grounded in Anthroposophy. Permitting an alien force to shape the instruments of one's expressive gestures may present an affront to autonomous individuals, but when direction is administered with tact, tyros of all ages make the acquaintance of personae occultly carried in their own bearing: By repeatedly, unreflectingly sinking into one's "limb-man," the cerebrally inclined can delight in learning to lumber like a peasant; locating the invisible plumb line that holds posture aloft, a committed pacifist might awaken to the fervent glory of knighthood. Extroverts acquire composure, rambles learn focus, different temperaments explore expressions polar to their native idioms. Barbara Renold ingeniously schedules two presentations: one sectioned over three days, with performances interspersed by related activities such as speech and drama workshops and historical and thematic analyses of the plays, and the second a full-day marathon (with breaks) that shows each play from start to finish.

But What Would Steiner Say?

Among the controversies that persistently swirl through anthroposophical circles, the question of how the originator of Anthroposophy would present his work today grows more pressing. Critics of the "preservation society" model that appears to them transfixed by the originator's accomplishments show understandable impatience with the irony that this titanic innovator is treated as though he were a dogmatist; these progressives are anxious to profit from his example by themselves innovating and urging us all to go and do likewise. More cautious students focus on the untapped value in the founder's rich legacy, which still remains marginal to the broader civilization; they believe this broader civilization can be fertilized only by the indirect and apparently conservative route of faithfully apprehending what was given as it was given.

Within all the fields of culture that spiritual science has addressed to transform and renew, it is the dramatic representations of daily life that most palpably reveal gaps between historical periods: Modern customs change so rapidly that the passage of but a few months will outmode figures of speech or styles of dress. What, then, are we to make of the substance, manner, and length of Rudolf Steiner's mystery dramas, which live at so remote a distance from contemporary theater, speech, and even thought? Why would extended soliloquies and the recitation of elaborate fairy-tales on stage capture an audience's attention? What, in the absence of postmodern ironic intent, will attract us to conversation itself presented as theater? Whatever would impel us to attend productions occupying an entire day? The answers to these questions live on the other side of our thorough immersion in the plays themselves.

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