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Folk Drama as Defined in Folklore and Theatrical Research

In 1968 Frederic Litto wrote the following: "Unlike more fortunate areas of folklore (folktale, riddle, folksong) there does not yet exist a satisfactory and generally accepted theoretical definition of just what folk drama is".¹

I quite agree with Litto. There is no generally accepted definition of folk drama and, in fact, no such definition has ever existed. What is more, there is not even a common term used by scholars: some call it folk drama, others use the term folk play. In German, the term Volksschauspiel seems to be more or less accepted. Laurits Bødker, in his Dictionary, seems to have forgotten about the whole genre.² In 1976, NIF prepared a terminological dictionary which includes the term folk-drama (and not folk-play) followed by the definition: a dramatic action with fixed roles presented before a public by non-professional persons in their own social surroundings.³ But as we shall see, this definition raises two questions which have to be discussed: whether to speak about folk-drama or folk-plays, and the question of the "non-professional" persons?

There are two different fields, which have definitions of folk-drama and their definitions are rather different. For history of theatre, folk-drama might include the following historical categories: (let me note in advance that in the following, I will only consider Europe, leaving aside acting in the so-called "primitive" or "tribal" cultures, as well as the plays performed in Asia).

1) The repertoire of professional or semi-professional market-players or wandering troupes if this repertoire is played for the so-called "folk". This includes performers in

¹ Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 81, No. 320, p. 168.

² Bødker, Laurits: International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore II. Folk Literature (Germanic), Copenhagen, 1965.

³ Termilexikon NIF Rapport 5, 1976 (mimeographed manuscript).

Antiquity, medieval wandering performers, puppeteers, commedia dell'arte, and similar phenomena up to the 20th century.

2) Mystery plays and miracle plays, performed in the Middle Ages or later, in cities or villages, by non-professional actors, but directed by the clergy.

3) The repertoire of any group of amateurs, if these amateurs belong to a social stratum which history of theatre considers to be "folk". Now, none of these categories quite agrees with the description of the "folk drama" or "folk play" given by folklorists. Whomever folklorists consider to be "folk", folklore is what their art is called when it is not professional. But for the most part, the categories I have mentioned are all performed or directed by professionals, and the texts are mostly shortened versions of narratives or dramas written by individual authors, generally by professional ones. Of course, all folklorists know that folk poetry and national literature constantly influence each other, and the 19th century concept of "das Volk dichtet" seems like a romantic illusion to us today. But no matter what definition of "folk" and "folk poetry" we adopt, professionals cannot play a great role in that definition.

It is clear, therefore, that folklorists cannot use the categories used by history of theatre, but need a definition of their own; folkloristic categories will not be the same as those used by history of theatre.

Let us first discuss the terms drama and folkplay. I myself prefer to use the term folkplay instead of drama. Folk-plays do not quite correspond to drama as defined by aesthetics, e.g. by Aristotle, Hegel or others. The similarity of the two categories derives from the fact that in both there can be verbal dialogues and mimetic action performed by several living persons, or by puppets. But drama presupposes conscious motion, an atmosphere where the subjective consciousness reaches a high level as regards world-view and artistic expression. Drama shows us a conscious conflict between individuals or social groups. The actors are active motive powers of their fate, whether the outcome is good (comedy) or bad (tragedy).

So I think that drama presupposes an urban atmosphere and individual playwrights. In fact, there are no real folk-tragedies, although folkcomedies might be more comparable to literary comedies. In folk-plays the actors are generally passive sufferers of their fate.

Let us now survey the categories of folk-drama (or rather folk-play) as seen by folklorists. These categories are defined in terms of the content and not the form of the plays.

1) Mythical-magical-religious plays (cultic plays, mythical operas, dramatized myths, etc).

2) Burlesque plays, farces, which take their plot from everyday life and can be satirical, imitating the peculiarities of individuals or groups, of animals, of funny and strange behaviour, etc.

3) Historical, or pseudo-historical, or romantic plays.

Their plot is generally taken from some chapbook, i.e. epic narrative. Included in this group are plays about highwaymen, the plots of the Italian "maggio" (Roland, Orlando, etc), the German *Genoveva* and *Griseldis* plays, etc. The compilers of the texts also belong to the "folk".

These groups correspond more or less to the categories employed by Leopold Schmidt,⁴ who uses the terms:

⁴ Schmidt, Leopold: *Le théâtre populaire européen*, Paris, 1965.

1. Pièces de théâtre se rattachant à des coutumes populaires.
2. Pièces de théâtre sur des sujets chrétiens.
3. Pièces de théâtre sur des sujets tirés de la littérature populaire.

In the strictest sense of the word, only the first of Schmidt's groups includes real "folk-creations", whereas my first and second groups do.

Mythical-magical plays are always performed within the framework of folk-customs. Belonging to this group we have the so-called combat-plays (English Mummer's Plays, the Battle between Summer and Winter, Carnival and Lent, the Old and New Year, etc). Often there is no text at all, or little text, and the action is stressed (sword-dances). In other cases, no combat takes place: there is only a masked person, in the guise of an animal or supernatural being. (Dodola, Green George, Whitsun-King or Whitsun-Queens, kukeri, Lazaruvane in Bulgaria, etc.)⁵

As to religious plays, rural Nativity plays and Herodes-plays are our chief consideration. As regards Passion-plays, they are generally too elaborate an affair to be performed without the aid of the local clergy or teachers. The texts of Nativity and Herodes plays also derive from some written text, but the rural population changes them to such an extent that I dare to call them "folklore".

In the second group, folk-comedies are generally performed at Carnival time or during weddings. Let me cite a Hungarian example: the so-called mock-wedding and mock funeral.⁶ Mock-funerals were mentioned as early as the 17th century. The central figure of this play is always a lad laid out as if dead; other young men appear as mock priests and mourners. In Roman Catholic villages, the fun consists chiefly in imitating the Latin ceremony and Latin church songs. This is achieved through repetition of the names of the months (Januarius, Februarius, etc.). The sermon delivered over the dead person is a mixture of Latin words and allusions to his gluttony and lechery. In Protestant villages, another type of mock-funeral play has become popular: a lad covered with a sheet is brought in, followed by a sham priest and the "relatives" of the deceased, who bid him farewell with mirthful and highly seasoned words. The humor of the play lies in the notion that although the man himself is dead, his penis is not. This is generally represented by a red carrot or red pepper. Zoltán Ujváry has recently published several variants of this type of play. Mock-weddings are equally a mixture of obscenities and satirical dialogues.

In the same category we find several types of Carnival play which make fun of individuals or ethnic groups, old women, clergymen, etc.

Now for the third category. Generally a rural group (but industrial workers might just as well) decide to perform a play. The text is compiled by members of the group, and the plot is generally taken from a well-known narrative. A good example of this type is provided by folk-plays about robbers and highwaymen known all over Eastern Europe.

Folk-plays (as defined by history of theatre) and the phenomena which are called folk-plays by folklorists are sometimes similar. This is especially true for group three,

⁵ Dömötör, Tekla: *A népszokások költészete*, Budapest, 1974.

Wildhaber, Robert (ed.): *Masken und Maskenbrauchstum aus Ost- und Südosteuropa*, Basel, 1968.

⁶ Ujváry, Zoltán: *A temetés paródiája*, Debrecen, 1978.

except for the fact that in the first case, the texts are of literary origin, and that in the second case, the compilers are not professionals, and the original text itself is folkloristic too.

Plays connected with folk-customs have generally not been performed by professional market-players, but only by the rural population.

The performance of religious plays, mysteries and miracles might be found on all levels. In Liège, for example, a professional puppet-theatre used to show Nativity plays which were very similar to folklore-texts.

This ambiguous situation has become more complicated in the last twenty years. Some categories are on the wane or have disappeared completely: very few mystery plays are performed nowadays by adult folk-groups; this task has been taken over by schools and today the plays are performed by school-children and taught to them by teachers from printed books.

The category of market players has almost disappeared, except for a few puppet-theatres and the Karagheuz-theatres in Greece and Turkey. Magic folk-customs are also disappearing rapidly.

But at the same time, folk-plays have become fashionable on the professional stage, on television, in broadcasting, etc. But as the people involved really do not quite know what folk-plays are, they make some very gross errors, and the result is clearly fakelore. For instance, dialogues connected with fertility-magic are, when their context is not evident, an empty shell. This situation has become so blatant, that UNESCO has formed a special committee to study it.

The same mistakes are evident in amateur acting. Both urban and rural groups try to produce "folk-plays", or what they believe to be folk-plays. They also transform epic folk-narratives (ballads, tales) into dialogues. The result of such transformation has no aesthetic value, and it cannot reflect the social problems of our times either.

Does this mean that folk-plays are gone forever? I sincerely doubt it. Even with the growing impact of mass media on folk-culture, the desire for creative self-expression in the form of acting is very evident in our days. People are not satisfied with being only on the receiving end of this process; they do not want to be passive onlookers; they want to express themselves in acting, too. Also, what is needed are models for creating new texts. At present, the amateur groups seem to be groping in the dark with their attempts to create new folk-plays. But I believe that sooner or later, a new type of folk-play will again be created, written and performed by non-professional groups. Myth and magic will acquire new meaning in this new kind of folk-play, and so will social conflicts and aspirations. Green George and market-players no longer have a place in our culture — but maybe new forms will be found, expressing our common hopes and fears, and the desire to laugh at others — and at ourselves.