Rainis’ play **“Ilya Muromets”** (*„Iļja Muromietis”*) (1923)

Rainis begun to write the tragedy “Ilya Muromets” in Switzerland and finished it after returning to Latvia. In 1912 he focused on studying the Russian bylina tales (*были́на*), but the work on the play started in 1915. It continued with multiple breaks until it was finished in 1922. From a book of bylinas Rainis mostly used the Kievan bylina cycle for his tragedy. It tells about the life and heroics of Ilya Muromets (folk hero of the Kievan Rus’). Rainis saw a relation between him and self: “Ilya starts his path as an already seasoned man, at the age of thirty; I was also fated to begin my work at the same age, is it a wonder that for me Ilya seems like an example? Is it a wonder, how despondently a song about a distress sounds?:

“How did you appear, misery? Where did you emerge?”

When we started our work, already middle aged, then we knew, where the misery emerged: the first half of our lives had already told us. But the second half additionally taught us many things: knowing we walked towards our work and fate, but still missed.”

In his play Rainis took over most of the characters from bylinas. Contrary to “Indulis and Ārija” which is a youth tragedy, Rainis called “Ilya Muromets” a tragedy of old age. At the center of the play is the theme of fighting for freedom that is raised to the level of philosophical generalization by the poet. Similarly to Lāčplēsis (Bearslayer), Ilya is the defender of the oppressed and a fighter against all evil. Having traveled throughout the vast lands of Russia, performing heroic deeds and then returned the court of Prince Vladimir, Ilya understands that he didn’t alleviate the misery of the people and could not eliminate the heaviness of the land. He isn’t a thinker, but a muscleman, who searches for a task fitting to his strength. He couldn’t grow any further, became self-righteous and his energy was exhausted. The tragedy of Ilya is the inability to develop and understand the future. This is told to him by his son Vanadznieks, which is torn in half and thus killed by Ilya in a fit of anger:

“Small you’ve become, father, you cannot grow: —

You didn’t receive morning, when morning came, your son, —

This is where lies your fault; there wanes your goal and work.”

This is also reminded to Ilya by Latigora. Her name is a variation of the word “latir” (“латырь”) which means amber and bears a connection to the Baltic Sea. She symbolizes a new spiritual culture, she calls for Ilya to change, develop inside. Latigora is character related to Spīdola. At the tragedy’s ending the hero loses his life, without having fulfilled his ideals. By the law of fate, Ilya can’t fall in battle, so he turns into stone that can only shed drops of tears. Rainis interweaved a new meaning in this ancient epic folklore material. This tragedy is the last drama work finished by Rainis, where the depth of philosophical thought merges with a dramatic force.

The tragedy “Ilya Muromets” is published by the publishing house “Anša Gulbja apgāds” in 1923. Differently from the rest of the plays, this tragedy had a short path on the stage. The staging of this work requires a large group of actors, a large staging and the ability to remember the massive amount of the tragedy’s text. Also the theme of Russian bylinas wasn’t always drawing the attention of the public. The play’s premiere was held at the Latvian National Theater in 1928, produced by Alfrēds Amtmanis-Briedītis. The second staging produced by Eduards Smiļģis was at the Daile Theater in 1962, with Uldis Lieldidžs in the role of Ilya and Vija Artmane in the role of Latigora.