Rainis’ play **“Joseph and His Brothers”** (*„Jāzeps un viņa brāļi”*) (1919)

Rainis’ tragedy “Joseph and His Brothers” was written in Switzerland over a long period of time. No other play took Rainis so much effort, energy and time as “Joseph” did. The early ideas about the creation of a tragedy emerged already in 1906. The most active work happened during the years 1912 and 1913. The work was finished in 1914, although separate adjustments and additions were in process until 1919. “Joseph and His Brothers” is one of Rainis’ most splendid works of drama. Many of his personal emotional experiences, contemplations and cognitions are expressed in the tragedy. While writing the play, he was addressing the most difficult problems of his life — friend betrayals after the destruction of The New Current movement, the feelings of injustice that he had carried for years, the contradictive feelings of revenge and forgiveness.

Rainis took the plot form the Bible the First Book of Moses. The legend about Joseph gave him a chance to talk about the most important questions concerning humanity. Joseph, with his dream about a new world, caused his brothers hatred and a cruel reckoning. Thrown into a pit and sold into slavery, he ends up in Egypt. Here Joseph reaches a high standing and being in a completely different social status he meets his brothers, who come to Egypt in search for food during the famine years. How will their new relationships be build? Differently from the biblical Joseph, who calmly accepted the will of God, Rainis’ Joseph is a person full of contradictions, very human and complex. This is what makes him so close and understandable to the readers and watchers. Joseph is a person with his own pain, longings, love and hatred. He wishes for justice, even if it would require breaking the pillars that hold the real world. This is a very human though:

*„Kas piedot ir?*

*Vai ļaunu teikt par labu? Ļaunam tapt?*

*Nē, ļaunu vērst par labu, tas ir piedot.”*

“What do you tell me?

Say, what is this forgiveness?

Must we not compel the wicked, till they turn to good?”

/Translated by Grace Rhys/

/*or*/

“What does it mean to forgive?

To recognize wicked as good? Become wicked oneself?

No, respond to wicked with good — that means to forgive.”

Joseph wants to gain an answer to the most global questions about the world’s existence. It is impossible to do that in just one human lifetime. In the tragedy’s conclusion he sees his path in leaving his current life. The universe and eternity are those dimensions, which Joseph hopes to reach in harmony with himself and the world. There have been two women in Joseph’s life. One of the most beautiful of Rainis’ characters — Dina sacrificed herself to give Joseph the love, that later became the strength and the point of spiritual reliance for his whole life. But Asnate supported Joseph with her gentle love for all the long years spent in a foreign place.

The tragedy used historic materials about Hebrew and Egyptian life. However Rainis didn’t precisely follow certain limitations of the time, instead he created an atmosphere fitting to the era and setting. The tragedy has a clear, classical drama structure, where the psychological layer entwines with the philosophical. The theme of Joseph was also used by Thomas Mann in his broad tetralogy.

The war delayed the printing of the play. After fragments were published in periodicals, “Joseph and His Brothers” was printed in book form in 1919 by the publishing house “Anša Gulbja izdevniecība”. Aspazija had translated the tragedy in German (1921). The play was also translated in English, Russian, Estonian and Italian languages. “Joseph and His Brothers” first came on stage in 1920 at the Latvian National Theater (produced by Aleksis Mierlauks). The role of Joseph has been performed by people such as Jānis Ģērmanis, Alfrēds Amtmanis-Briedītis, Eduards Smiļģis, Žanis Katlaps and Jānis Paukštello. In the year 2000, “Joseph and His Brothers” was staged at the Orion Theater in Stockholm.