Rainis’ play **“Fire and Night”** (*„Uguns un nakts”*) (1905)

The play “Fire and Night” was composed in 1903 and 1904 at different places in Latvia, but for the most part it was written at the poets’ summerhouse in Jaundubulti, at Rīga’s Jūrmala. “Already a long time before “F. and N.”, I had been deeply and long occupied by the problem of systemizing Latvian hero legends and preparing them as material for new drama,” admitted Rainis. The poet was influenced by examples from the European culture as well — the rebirth of the Nibelung epic in the operas of Richard Wagner.

As motivation came the opera libretto writing contest issued in 1903 by the Music committee of the Riga Latvian Society, who suggested picking a theme from Latvian folklore, especially emphasizing the legend of the Bearslayer (*Lāčplēsis*) processed by Andrejs Pumpurs. Rainis started the work, but didn’t manage to meet the deadlines and decided to take back the first acts turned in for the contest. The work overgrew the size of an opera libretto and thus was created Rainis’ first big drama.

In 1905 the play, now titled “Fire and Night. An Old Song in New Sounds” was published by the monthly magazine “Home Visitor” (*„Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts”*). The book was printed in 1907 by the book publishing house “Thoughts” (*„Domas”*). The plot was based on Pumpurs’ epic poem “Bearslayer” (*„Lāčplēsis”*), to whom Rainis gave deeper dimensions by talking for the first time about Latvia as a country. He was trying to reveal the life of the nation in the course of centuries. “The horizon of a genius awareness can extend to infinity, grasp days, years and year thousands and millions, and all of creation and the crossroads of history,” wrote Aspazija. ““Fire and Night” embraces an incomparably larger specter of centuries, space, events, characters and problems than “Faust”. “Fire and Night” is incomparably shorter. This is possible only with an impressionistic way of working,” explained Rainis. The colours, sounds, symbols act together to reveal a thought. Rainis created what he called “organic symbols”, which have multiple meanings that change in the course of the play.

“Fire and Night” was added to the Latvian Literature Canon as the most notable example of symbolism in Latvian literature. Guntis Berelis wrote: “As the title already signifies, Rainis, being a confirmed dialectician, has separated the play’s characters in absolute opposites. On one hand — the forces of light: Bearslayer (the power of the folk and its thirst for freedom), Laimdota (could be considered a symbol of Latvia), Latvian Chieftains. On the other hand — the forces of darkness: The Black Knight, German invaders, the nation’s traitors — Kangars and Līkcepure. This fire/night symbolism is very extensive and multilayered and reaches by far beyond the primitive dialectic borders announced in the title. Fundamentally this is a universal philosophy that has been contained in simple and recognizable symbols. The philosophy incorporates in the tale’s plot, as well as in the events of the 13th century and the Revolution of 1905 and the hope for free Latvia and the eternal battle between the light and dark in general. A very peculiar character is Spīdola, who is usually understood as a symbol of beauty and the associate of Bearslayer. But in fact, Spīdola is the “key” to the “Fire and Night” and to the symbolism of Rainis in general. Her words — “I am fleeting, I am like the sun, / My thousand colours undulate on earth: / Fulfilled within me, all things glow, take life” — is a summary of the symbolism philosophy that embodies Rainis’ idea of the changeability and multiple meanings of a symbol. Bearslayer and Laimdota are clear and evident characters, but Spīdola, for example, sometimes happens to co-operate with the forces of darkness (in other words, there is no light without the dark — and vice versa), however it is exactly her who says to Bearslayer the words, that are at the base of many works written by Rainis: “Changing upward, you can surpass fate!””.

In 1911 the play appeared on stage for the first time. The New Riga Theater’s staging with the producer Aleksis Mierlauks, came to be the beginning of a new era of the Latvian theater. For the first time a whole performance creator group was working together. The decorations and costumes were made by Jānis Kuga, the music was composed by Nikolajs Alunāns. The actors: Bearslayer — Ādolfs Kaktiņš, Eduards Smiļģis, Spīdola — Tija Banga, Lilija Ērika, Laimdota — Biruta Skujeniece, Mirdza Šmithene. The play experienced 100 performances in the span of three seasons. There were many more productions in the following years, especially the stage version by Eduards Smiļģis at the Daile Theater in 1947, with Lilita Bērziņa and Artūrs Filipsons in the main roles, which became legendary. The young composer Jānis Mediņš composed the opera “Fire and Night” (*„Uguns un nakts”*) in 1921, and today it has become a part of the Golden Fund of the Latvian Opera Music. The drama “Fire and Night” has been translated in Estonian, English, French, Russian and Belarus languages.

(The quotes for this annotation were taken from the English translation by R.R. Miller.)