Rainis’ play **“The Golden Horse”** (*„Zelta zirgs”*) (1909)

The play was composed in the late autumn of 1909 in Castagnola, Switzerland. The work was suggested by the New Riga Theater. In the middle of October Rainis received a letter with the request to send a play appropriate for children to be staged for Christmas. Although the poet wanted to refuse at first because he didn’t have any finished plays at the moment, his imagination started to work its wonders and he set about to write.

“The Golden Horse” was written in a very short time, in about a month. In a 17th November letter addressed to Ernests Birznieks-Upītis Aspazija wrote, that Rainis “Is preparing a play for children that is rather meant for adults, but the fable is very beautifully combined and it’s a legend about different solstices.” Rainis used Kreutzwald’s collection of Estonian fairytales in German translation. At the center of the play is a fairytale about a princess that has been for seven years sleeping at the very peak of a glass mountain. At a set day someone must climb the glass mountain and carry the princess down, however if this doesn’t happen, she will fall asleep for all eternity. The victor will get the princess as his bride. The three brothers want to take part in the competition. In the fairytale the youngest brother named Antiņš that is considered a fool by everybody, receives a prize from his deceased father as thanks for guarding his grave — the ability to call forth a copper, silver and golden horse. He attempts to ride up the mountain three times. In the third time the younger brother finally reaches the peak with the help of the golden horse and carries the princess down. Soon the wedding follows and the older brothers die from envy.

The fairytale motifs are very close to the Latvian folklore and in places have merged with it. Differently from the fairytale, Rainis introduces new characters to the play — the White Father “of thousand disguises” and the Black Mother “of a single being”, as well as the Mother of the Wind and the Mother of Snow. Rainis connected the play’s action with solstice times and called the work a “solstice fairytale”. When the resolving part of the play encountered writing difficulties, the impressions of the sun and nature helped out: “I was sitting alone on my mountain of uncertainty and had already begun to write some scene in “Joseph” (*„Jāzeps”*), when a flock of seven ravens flew over my head, letting me know about their presence with their deep, melodic voices. Suddenly in front of my eyes there was a scene of ravens. Antiņš was saved and was riding to the top of the glass mountain. That day was a bright, warm sun; the sun has always helped me.”

Although the play was initially written for children, the symbolic lines strongly entwine the work and it gains multiple levels — a fairytale, nature symbolism and drama ideas. Similar to “Fire and Night” (*„Uguns un nakts”*) Rainis added new sounds to the old material. It is the battle between the light and dark itself. The White Father symbolizes change and development, but the Black Mother — standstill and stagnation. Themes of the nation’s freedom and future enter the play — the princess Saulcerīte, that has been asleep for not seven, but seven hundred years, becomes the symbol of freedom and the process of waking her — the fight for freedom. Very important is the portrayal of the hero’s growth and selflessness. The youngest brother Antiņš is no hero, but a simple human with high moral qualities who grows to the level of heroism. In the play, scenes of daily life entwine with fantasy. In household situations the heroes communicate in prose, but the fantasy characters talk in poetry.

Because of the tight time schedule Aspazija helped out with the work. She not only edited the texts, but also wrote the scenes of the Mother of the Wind and the Mother of Snow. “The Golden Horse” becomes one of the most popular and most staged plays of Rainis. It has been translated in Lithuanian, Estonian, English and Russian languages. The play’s German translation was done by Rainis himself. In 1965 the opera “The Golden Horse” (*„Zelta Zirgs”*) by Arvīds Žilinskis begun its life on stage with Jānis Zabers in the role of Antiņš. The play has been performed by the Latvian Puppet Theatre and it has entered Europe in the form of an animation movie. The characters and symbols live a life of their own. No other quotation by Rainis has been this much folklorized as the White Fathers line “He who changes, shall remain” (*„Pastāvēs, kas pārvērtīsies!”*). But the symbol of the glass mountain has inspired the architect Gunārs Birkerts to create the building of the Latvian National Library.