

REVIEW: STAGED READING OF *GRAVITY OF THE BLACK HOLE*, A DRAMATIC POEM SUITE BY FRED FEIRSTEIN, STAGED BY BARBARA VANN

Fred Feirstein is a psychoanalyst, playwright, and poet, highly accomplished in all three areas. He has published eight volumes of poetry, has had a dozen plays produced, has been a Guggenheim Fellow in poetry, a Rockefeller OADR Fellow in playwrighting, and was a Pulitzer finalist. His poem suite, *Gravity of the Black Hole*, subtitled *An Expressionist Sequence*, is permeated with psychoanalytic understanding, examining the full range of emotion, complex family dynamics, and hidden meanings of myths and fairy tales from an unusual perspective. Most psychoanalytic studies of fairy tales and mythology emerge from Jungian thinkers. Feirstein approaches myth and fairy tales, and 20th century European history, from an eclectic Freudian stance, yet paying homage to Jung, an unusual event in the psychoanalytic world. He writes not as an essayist, but as a dramatic poet. The poem suite was produced in March 2010 at the Medicine Theatre in New York City as part of Medicine Show's 26th annual Celebration of the Spoken Word, the Word/Play series. The poems, and the fairy tale characters in the poems, were given voice by nine actors, including director Barbara Vann.

Barbara Vann's production gave the poems and characters more than voice. The production brought them to life, embodied by the nine wildly romping, antic, frenzied actors, a style startling, disorienting, and ultimately, oddly suiting the dark underpinnings of Feirstein's depiction of a world fraught with danger and destruction.

The poem suite is divided into three sections, Oedipus/Christ/Dionysus; Snow White/Sleeping Beauty/Cinderella; and Hansel and Gretel/Little Red Riding Hood, with a prologue, Disney on Parade. Feirstein demands a nakedness of psyche: this is not a matter of "abandon hope, all ye who enter here," but "abandon defenses, all ye who enter here." In taut, witty, scathing verse, he rubs our noses in what we know but somehow don't openly articulate or acknowledge, unless, of course, we dare to eat a peach, we dare to encounter deep unconscious process, and to see menace lurking everywhere.

The prologue, a twelve line, three stanza poem, "Disney on Parade," sets the stage. Take that phrase "sets the stage" both literally and figuratively. In the staged reading, the actors lent a frantic energy to the poem, setting the stage for the evening. Were we as readers to be alone with the print version, the poem leads us through the images of Disney, cinematic or theatrical, straight into our own lives, beginning with our sense of home and comfort:

Wheeling down Main Street in Technicolor light
Are Disney's heroes, our mythology,
A comfort in the middle of the night.

Feirstein swiftly recounts social traumas: war, cultural suicide, greed, then references the traumas of Hansel and Gretel, and closes the poem with:

Those childhood traumas were much worse than these.

Teach us to be courageous and naïve.

What Feirstein invokes will be spelled out further in the suite, the contrasts of innocent belief in goodness, an American/Disneyfied myth, with the dark foreshadowings of Grimm's fairy tales, leading from the unrelenting evil of witches and ogres to the unrelenting evil of Nazism.

Feirstein sets and re-sets his stage. In the next poem, "Myths," he references Jung, Freud, Orpheus, Oedipus, and in the final stanza opens up his theme:

So ask yourselves, what myth became your Fate,
What traumas drew you in to play what part.
What self-deceptions, and what hypnoid states
Determined what exactly broke your heart.

These are questions the analytic process asks of us – but not usually in such exquisitely crafted verse. Feirstein identifies the ego state of trauma, the dissociative defense, and the broken heart that is at the center of trauma, the sense of let-down, betrayal, horror, that the mythological heroes are about to enact for us in this sequence of the poem suite.

Feirstein explores myths of masculinity, of femininity, and of childhood. The childhood archetype is Hansel and Gretel, male and female. The masculine is represented by Oedipus, Christ, and Dionysus, the feminine by Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella.

The hero of the "Oedipus/Christ/Dionysus" sequence is Freud. Freud as Oedipus encountering a powerless Jewish father-figure Laius, Freud who discovered the sexual nature of early childhood as well as Oedipal fantasy, Freud who discovered and re-discovered the traumas of Oedipal conflict, a Freud who saw deep into the individual psyches of the collective psyche of a Europe heading toward Nazi domination.

So Freud went blind when the Nazis came
And Ausch-witched his mouth for that.

Or, in another poem:

In Freud's Vienna no one could believe
The children they molested there could feel.

Or another:

The nightmare when the 20th Century wakes
Amidst the litter of the bourgeoisie.
You see this as an analyst and Jew.

In the title poem, “Gravity of the Black Hole,” Feirstein takes us straight to the central mythological element of the Nazi era, which Freud identified long before there was such a thing as the Nazi party, although there was just about to be one:

He heard the Nazi Wolf banging down doors
But closed his eyes with smoke to keep alive
Mentally, though he elegantly described
The gravity of the Black Hole – The Death drive.

Like Christ, Oedipus, Dionysus,
Freud played the role Fate cast him in.

Again, who else but a psychoanalyst/poet/playwright, who else but Fred Feirstein, could have evoked with such intensity and compactness, with a great debt to dreamwork/artwork/poetic mindwork condensation, the relationship of Freud’s insights, the rising resentment of post-World War I German nationalism culminating in Nazism, and the ongoing collective myths we are mesmerized by because they are true within our psyches. Christ, Oedipus, and Dionysus: two dying gods, Christ and Dionysus, always resurrected; two forsaken sons, Christ and Oedipus; two blinded men, Oedipus and Freud. We have to live the myths within our selves to recognize how they play out within the world.

From the myths of masculinity Feirstein takes us to a myth of femininity, a myth of a fairy tale heroine who needs to be rescued by a prince, before it is too late, before she ages out of princess status: “Snow White/Sleeping Beauty/Cinderella.” He introduces this section with a poem called “Fairytales,” beginning:

Storytellers know what scholars learn
That we in time, because of time, must burn
And to the womb of Death we must return.

The next poem in this sequence, “Snow White,” addresses concerns about aging and dying, concerns that are endemic to both women and men, but in this instance, concerns that are cast in specifically female terms, menopause and a woman’s fear that her prince will never come.

Now is her final chance to meet the Prince.
“My inner wars are over, I need *peace*.
Not the poison of my mother’s “No!”
I’ve wakened to the dreaded five oh!

She continues her lament, finishing:

Hurry, Prince, I’m so tired of living.”

Does Feirstein oversimplify, or has he hit a mother lode of feminine fears? In the following poem, "The Prince," perspectives both masculine and feminine are identified. The Prince faces the need to separate and individuate, to live independently, without seeing the Witch Mother potential in the beauty served up under glass. Snow White has only two ways of expressing her need, as Witch Mother or as Victim, but not as Beloved.

At this point, as a woman reader who is an admirer of Feirstein's work and his great gifts, I feared that Feirstein faltered. The feminine mental state becomes subordinated to the Prince's entrapment by a Witch Mother masquerading as innocent beauty. I would have preferred to know more of the dilemma of the innocent beauty poisoned by an envious mother figure, the witchy stepmother who evidently stands in for the Electral mother. The opportunity seemed lost when the following poem, "The Prince's Witch," focuses on the prince in the hands of an anally intrusive enema-giving mother. And yet....

I saw the point! The subsequent poems addressing Snow White also focus on the male psyche. I found myself reconciling to Feirstein's vision, because he so ably captures, in this sequence, a male fear of female energy, Man dwarfed! He explores the psyches of the Seven Dwarves, Snow White's companions. In "The Bitter Dwarf" we learn:

We're doomed to gaze on Snow White's purple eyes,
Impotent, as she prays some Prince will come.

In addressing the masculine fear that the princess he loves expects a perfect lover, and that he cannot measure up to the perfect lover, Feirstein also exposes Snow White's dilemma. If she is too desirable, she will encounter only dwarves! In "The Schizoid Dwarf," Feirstein looks at the isolation of a man dwarfed, a man who sees the princess only as the Witch's daughter, a man who will be metamorphosized by a Circe-Witch into a pig or a mouse. A prince eaten by fear of diminishment cannot be the heroic Odysseus, but rather, a common sailor turned into a pig. Are you a man or a mouse, the dwarfed prince asks himself, and answers, a mouse.

The challenge intensifies. In "The Eros Dwarf," Snow White is in the grip of Thanatos, the death instinct, subordinate to the Witch-Mother, seemingly stuck there forever unless she finds her hero prince. The burden is on the prince to free Snow White from lifelessness, and the weight of such a burden dooms him to dwarfishness. In reading these poems, I wondered, could Eros, love, free them both, so that neither is dependent on each other, but discovers the other through self-liberation.

Several lovely, brilliant poems later, following the agonies of a schizoid Humpty Dumpty, a Jack and Jill terrorized during the World Trade Center attack, the threats of "The Sinister Dwarf," we return to an unawakened young woman, not Snow White this time, but Sleeping Beauty. Sleeping Beauty is doomed to wait until "The Prince rescued her from pathology." Feirstein exhorts us, "...if we want to live, we must forgive." In this poem Sleeping Beauty awakens into her own life, her "eternal present," into her own "intense, daily reality." She relinquishes fantasy. For me, the question lingers, was it the Prince who rescued her, or was it her capacity to love? In the next poem, "The Prince

Finds Sleep,” the Prince himself is not rescued by love, but is alone in a wintry wood, “Oedipus the Prince, Christ’s Ghost.”

The myths of girlhood in fairy tale land limit an emerging young woman to seeking a prince, instead of her own self-actualization.

Thus, the feminine dilemma is that of a princess entrapped by a Witch-Mother, an Electra without a father, and the masculine dilemma is that of a prince entrapped by his love for a princess who might have an internalized Witch-Mother who will dwarf him, cut him down to size, emasculate him.

The final feminine fairy tale archetypal young woman, a princess-to-be, is Cinderella, representative not only of the feminine psyche but of all the strivings of the human spirit. In “Cinderellas,” Feirstein tells us that we are “Cinderallas all” who “collapse in ashes.” Thus in this poem he liberates us from the convention of the princess awaiting a prince, and offers instead the need for all of us to survive childhood. Male and female, we are Cinderellas. He tells us, literally, that “unless we have good mothers to defeat the bad” we are destined for madness. Man or woman, we await resurrection from the death instinct, by many pathways, including longing for the prince, internalizing the Virgin Mary, or believing we are “baptized in the womb/As Oedipus, or Christ, or Dionysus.”

In the next several poems of this sequence, Feirstein actually offers answers – of a sort! A Father-King advises The Prince, “The slipper is a symbol for the vagina./So hold it lovingly and you will find her.” In “Step-Sisters” we are offered a guide to female individuation: “Princesses-in-Waiting they are passive/And do not see The Prince inside themselves.” Ultimately, “The Prince and Cinderella: The Ending” alerts us to the void represented by the witch – in this instance, a lower case “w” witch – again, the death instinct, contrasted with Eros, “Sex and love are Life, repression Death.” (Note: throughout the review I will use upper case “W” and lower case “w”, Witch or witch, as Feirstein uses them in his poetry.)

The final series of poems, “Hansel and Gretel/Little Red Riding Hood,” addresses caretaking and the lack of it in children’s lives, parental abandonments and childhood helplessness. If the caretakers are damaged, the children are at risk. The first poem in this sequence, “Caretaking,” positions Freud as blind prophet, announcing the death instinct as World War I comes to an end, a war in which his three sons served. Feirstein catalogs a series of murderous acts, both physical murder and soul murder, culminating in genocidal impulse, the death instinct turned against the designated Other. The murderers are those who “crucify a tribe, a race, a nation.” The luridly sadomasochistic world of fairy tales and myth are seen as a barely disguised symbolic representation of what people actually do. The grim Grimm fairy tales become the mid-20th century demonic evil of Nazism, a culture of perversity. The blandness of Disney animated characters can’t keep us from seeing the truths in the cultural heritage of European fairy tales. Hansel and Gretel are uncared for, abandoned children. “Hansel’s Abandonment” gives us an oedipally berserk Oedipus, “Blind with rage at the crossroads,/Oedipus, blind with rage, explodes.” The Witch’s oven becomes Auschwitz. Hansel and Gretel’s mother

and father are indicted for their depressed, deadened narcissism. Their failed marriage becomes deadly for their children. Perhaps we can find in Feirstein's identification of the deadened, depressed parents with Nazism a further identification of a marriage of Germanic heritage represented in the Grimm fairy tales with our cherished ancient Greek high culture represented in the myths of Oedipus and Dionysus. It seems that for Feirstein, Hansel and Gretel have always foreshadowed the genocidal attack on the Jews, represented by Auschwitz. "The Stepmom" begins,

The helplessness of children or the Jews
Makes me feel angry, weak, and vengeful.
Tell me, does it do the same to you?
It always happens when you lose a war.
You scapegoat and you practice child abuse.

His equation of the Nazi era with the symbolic resonances of the Hansel and Gretel story becomes totally explicit in "Hansel and Gretel," a 48-line poem indicting the culture that gave rise to the machinery of the Holocaust. With sublime artistry, he evokes the desperation of the starving children, children who represent the persecuted, and the temptations of the witch's house of plenty. The witch's oven, "Auschwitz-hot," is readied as the witch cries out, "Fatwa!" Gretel, "Strong as a Sabra," defeats the witch and frees her brother. Feirstein introduces a new element here, identifying a new and persistent threat to the Jews. His choice of "Fatwa" over "Jihad" as the war-cry of the witch highlights not the power of violence but the power of words. A fatwa is a verbal injunction that can overtly call for violence, and the concept drew world-wide attention when a fatwa was issued against the novelist Salman Rushdie.

Throughout the Hansel and Gretel sequence, the theme of the Witch-Mother and the enthralled child-abandoning father becomes more and more poignant, for it represents psychological states that underpin many family dynamics as well as psychological states that underpin war and genocide. The subsequent Hansel and Gretel poems in the sequence reprise the Father-God-related themes of Jesus and Dionysus and the Thanatos-Witch-Mother. These poems lead directly to the Little Red Riding Hood poem sequence, exploring the grand deception of the Wolf. In "Little Red Riding Hood's Breakdown," Little Red Riding Hood is the traumatized 63-year-old analysand of an analyst, freed at long last from a lifetime of masochism. The grandmother in "Grandma" is diagnosed as paranoid. In "Little Red Riding Hood's Mother," Little Red Riding Hood's mother has breast cancer and heart disease and is fearful of death, and Little Red Riding Hood wonders whether in her response to her mother she is sadistic or a good daughter. The Wolf in "Wolf Philosophy" self-justifies, or rationalizes, his behavior, contrasting the Witch's malice with his own fidelity to his carnivorous nature. As we encounter this cast of characters, we are faced with our own questions: is a person with a potentially terminal illness a complaining hypochondriac? Is resenting a chronically ill mother sadistic? After one has been eaten by a wolf, swallowed up in the belly of the beast, and ultimately rescued, is it paranoid to dread the next genocidal attack, which may come in the form of chronic illness? And if one is about to be slaughtered, does it matter if the slaughterer is malicious or just being true to himself?

Feirstein concludes his verse excursion into the psyche of a war-obsessed, genocidal Europe, with its legacies of Greek myth and Grimm fairy tales, with a baleful look at the picture-perfect idealized image of a squeaky clean, picturesque, picture post card Swiss Alpine valley, Trummelbach. Feirstein refuses to be seduced by flowerboxes and cable cars, sheep and wildflowers, yodeling and glockenspiels, churchbells and lieder. With all the glee of a latency-aged boy reveling in toilet humor, and all the sour disillusionment of a grown man who has comprehended the worst of human nature, Feirstein sneers the word “Trummelbach.”

Trummelbach. The name resonates
With romantic pomposity as you ascend
The mountain’s rectum in a steep dark
Cable car.

He speaks of “the ancient hidden shit-world of Europe/Hitler’s kingdom....”

And in his final poem, “*Envoi*,” he makes room for hope, moving “From the black hole of the womb/To the light of the birthing room....” Time is the only savior. As we reconsider the entire opus, we realize that salvation may not lie in the image of a dying and resurrected God, nor a self-blinding hero, nor Walt Disney, nor the Walt Disney animated creatures gamboling in innocence on a forest floor, nor a forest floor in central Europe home to the neglected and abandoned Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood, nor the palaces that sheltered all the fairy tale princesses.

Time is the only savior. If we make good use of time. As Feirstein makes good use of poetry, of image and music, meter and rhyme.

Envoi:

After visiting Feirstein’s vision of our world, a few words need to be offered about the nature of the production of his poem suite as a staged reading, and the power of his poetic craft. The production was engaging, antic and frantic, with actors evoking the frenzied exuberance of overly stimulated children, racing around the stage, stomping their feet, bug-eyed and cutesy-adorable. The production style evoked the tense drama of a fairy tale world where bad things continue to happen, and the even tenser drama of a cultured sophisticated world that produced a raging genocidal war machine, Western Europe during World War II. Yet reading the poems to one’s self adds a dimension that the production could not add, a brooding dark solitude. A stage production happens in a liquid time frame, flowing constantly until it is over. There is no opportunity to say, “Hey, wait a minute! What was that?” No opportunity to savor. This is not a fault of the particular production, just a function of poetry in real time, guided by a directorial vision. Spending time alone with the poetry, manuscript or book in hand, creates another experience. The reader can savor, re-read, turn back, linger, put the work down and walk away from it, temporarily, read aloud in one’s own voice, chant aloud, bellow aloud....

Feirstein has long emphasized formal and narrative elements in his poetry, as a founder of the Expansive Poetry movement. Rather than yield to the excesses of the modernist movement in 20th century American poetry, which emphasized confessional poetry, Feirstein conserves without being reactionary or regressive. He salvages the essential elements of poetry from the grab-bag of indulgence that modernist poetry can fall into at times. Those essential elements are formal elements that distinguish poetry from prose, the musicality of word-sound, of meter and rhyme, alliteration and assonance, sound-play. He graces structure with imagination, with imagery and ideas, with narrative and characterization. Modernism itself has much to offer. Free verse does indeed offer freedom, if it is imbued with sound-play, imagery, and thought, even if it isn't bound by dictated form. Yet there is something delightfully liberating about verse form in the hands of a master poet. And Feirstein is a master of verse form.

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