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### A Folk Tale “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” [Eglė Žalčių Karalienė] on the Soviet Stage as a Representation of Lithuanian Culture

A folk tale “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” is one of the most exceptional Lithuanian mythical tales, which has received a lot of attention from researchers of Indo-European mythology. After a Lithuanian poetess Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945) wrote a poem following the plot of the fairy tale, it became extremely popular on the Lithuanian stage during the Soviet period. Performances based on this tale or poem not only received several productions on different puppet theater stages, but there was also a ballet written by the composer Eduardas Balsys (1919–1984) which went through several different adaptations on the opera stage. This article will analyze the characteristics of this tale based poem, discuss its stage productions and the reasons for their popularity, and their significance for Lithuanian culture in the Soviet period. The study refers to the works of G. Kadžytė, A. Kapočiūtė, H. Šabaševičius, E. Tarasti, N. Vėlius, A. Žiūraitytė, W. Wolf, and others, and is based on comparative methodology.

**Key words:** Soviet period, Lithuanian theater, folk tale "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents", poem by Salomėja Nėris, stage productions

#### INTRODUCTION

A Lithuanian folk tale “Eglė, the Queen of Serpent” [Eglė žalčių karalienė] is one of the most idiosyncratic and authentic Lithuanian mythical folk tale within the whole Indo-European context. After a Lithuanian poetess Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945) created a poem using its plot, the tale became extremely popular on the Lithuanian stage during the Soviet period. Performances based either on this tale or on the poem not only received several productions on different puppet theater stages, but there was also a ballet written by the composer Eduardas Balsys (1919–1984), which also received several different treatments on the opera stage. The question arises, why did this mythical tale gain so much popularity in Lithuanian culture during the Soviet period (and later too)? How were the requirements of the socialist realism method taken into account when staging of the folk tale, Nėris' poem “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”? In the article I will briefly discuss the most important mythological elements of this tale, the new features of Nėris' poem and the variants of its embodiment on the stage in the Soviet period. The study refers to the works of G. Kadžytė, A. Kapočiūtė, H. Šabaševičius, E. Tarasti, N. Vėlius, A. Žiūraitytė, W. Wolf, and others, and is based on comparative methodology.

## THE TALE-POEM “EGLĖ, THE QUEEN OF SERPENTS”

**The Mythological Motifs of the Tale.** The plot of the tale<sup>1</sup>, the structure, the composition and other elements of the folk tale have show commonality with Indo-European mythology. Lithuanian researchers of folklore discovered many cultural and mythological symbols and connections in this tale. A researcher of Baltic religion Gintaras Beresnevičius considers this fairy tale to be a Lithuanian myth of theogony (Beresnevičius 2003). It contains not only the symbols of the transformation of man into a reptile, but also the symbols of the irreversible transformation of man into a tree. It is also one of the few Lithuanian folk tales, the end of which is unhappy. Mythologist Norbertas Vėlius notices the intonations of the ritual folklore genre – laments in the sung inserts of the fairy tale (Weeping of Žilvinas, turning into trees). The symbols of the spruce and the grass snake in Lithuanian folklore are associated with fertility: the spruce is a symbol of the vital power of the earth, the grass snake is a symbol of the fertility of animals and people (Vėlius 1983). The scholar states, that the mythical meanings of the characters, the general plot scheme and the similarity of individual details, and sometimes straight coincidence with ancient myths, show an undoubted inner connection between these narratives (ibid.). In the tale, some scholars sees the collapse of the powers of the old ideology, based on the European goddess – the Mother, the determinant of life and death – forming a new pantheon of gods in the male hierarchy (Vytautas Kavolis, Marija Gimbutienė, and others).

**Saloméja Nėris' Poem “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”: Etnocultural Features.** The plot of the tale, written from the oral versions of folk narrators, was already turning into a house-hold story told in a more prosaic and domestic language, and Nėris “returned it to the vast and visual space of the magical tale, adorning it with mythological motifs, weaving customs, even elements of customary law, interpretations of folklore genres” (Kadžytė 2005: 182). Under custom law, older sisters protect the younger one, Eglė, address her with interdiction (Nėris 1984: 142–456)<sup>2</sup>.

Lenktyniuoja, raitos  
Bangos ties krantū, –  
Trys žvejų mergaitės  
Sukasi ratu.

<...>

Racing, riding forward  
Waves towards the shore, –  
Three young fishers` daughters  
Move around in dance.

<...>

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<sup>1</sup> Eglė, a young girl bathing in the Baltic sea with her two sisters, finds a grass snake, Žilvinas in her clothes. It speaks in a human voice and, in exchange for clothes, asks Eglė to promise to marry him, which she carelessly does. Three days later, thousands of serpents from the sea visit Eglė's parents' homestead in search of the promised bride, but the family tries to deceive them three times in a row by handing over a goose, a sheep and a cow. The cuckoo warns serpents of deception all three times. When the snakes get infuriated with deception, the parents fear to interfere into Eglė's marriage to Žilvin. In place of a repulsive grass snake on the beach, now Žilvinas appears to Eglė in his true image, a handsome young man. After celebrating their wedding and having four children – sons Ažuolas (Oak), Uosis (Ash) and Beržas (Birch) and a young daughter, Drebulė (Aspen) – they both live happily in the depth of the sea. One day Eglė decides to visit her relatives on land, but Žilvinas strongly opposes it. In order to visit her relatives, she has to accomplish three unattainable tasks: to spin a never-ending tuft of fiber, to wear off iron clogs, and to bake a cake without using any utensils. Eglė performs these tasks with the help of a witch, and her husband agrees to let her visit home. Žilvinas tells the departing Eglė how to call him from the shore. The chant is known to only her and her children: “Oh Žilvine, Žilvinė! if you are alive send white milk foam, if you're dead send black blood foam.” Wishing not to let Eglė leave home, twelve of her brothers try to find out from her children how to summon Žilvinas. The sons, even as they suffer physical assault, do not betray the chant, but Drebulė, the youngest daughter, frightened by the threats, blurts it out. After speaking the chant the brothers summon Žilvinas and kill him with scythes. Eglė, ready to go back to the sea, cries out the chant at the sea, but it shows her the foam of blood. Žilvinas announces who killed him and who betrayed the secret chant. The grieving Eglė casts a magic spell on her children – for their strength, her sons are turned into a strong oak, an ash and a birch, and her frightened daughter is turned into an ever-shaking aspen. The widow herself turns into a spruce.

<sup>2</sup> Poetry literal translations by Lora Tamošiūnienė.

– Egle, nebelaukiam!  
Einava namo!  
Slibinai atplaukia,  
Veizėk, sutemoj – –

– Egle, we won` t wait you!  
Let us all go home!  
Serpents will be swimming  
Look into the dark – –

It is also the tradition of a custom etiquette that a serpent in the sea turns to the older sisters when asks for Eglė`s word to marry him. The chief of the serpents, who crawls into the house with the bride's suite, speaks politely, similar to the customary matchman's oration:

O žaltys didžiausias  
Šliaužia pro duris,  
Mandagiai paklausęs:  
Gal neišvargs?

And the largest serpent  
Comes into the door,  
Courteously asking:  
Will he be let in?

Jis marčios atvykęs? –  
Jūra ten gili –  
Laukia ten jaunikis  
Gintaro pily.

He will take his son`s bride? –  
Sea is deep in place –  
Bridegroom is awaiting  
In an amber house.

Nėris consistently establishes the symbolism of numbers in the poem: three daughters of a fisherman, from whom the third, the youngest is chosen; matchmakers – serpent arrive after three days; for the third time, serpents will not be deceived. Eglė has not been in her homeland for nine years, she has nine brothers instead of 12 as in fairy tales. Also, Eglė, who is visiting with her children home under customary law, is “untouchable” for three days, only after this time she is lured to stay and violence is used against children (Kadžytė 2005).

Ethnocultural tradition in Nėris' poem interact with the mythical world. For example, the cuckoo – the bird of truth – is singing out the truths on serpents deception; learning the name of the enemy, according to the mythological concept, means acquiring a superior weapon and so on. In simple folk tales, the name of the serpent is tried to be found out in a more traditional daily episodes – while taking a night`s duty with sheperds or in a forest, and in Nėris' poem – on the magical St. John's eve:

– Švento Jono naktį  
Klausime žvaigždės,  
Imsim laužus degti, –  
Raganos padės (164)

– On the eve of St. John  
Let's ask a star,  
Let's set up fires –  
Witches will help us.

In a folklore tale, Eglė and her children, who have lost the opportunity to return to the mythical world, and at the same time cannot be with Žilvinas' killers, are turned to the trees by gods: “The gods turned it into a spruce tree, the eldest son into an oak, the younger into an ash, and the daughter into an aspen” (ibid.: 188). In the singing inserts of the folk tale, Eglė turns herself and children into the trees. However, in Nėris' poem, the expression of passions is much stronger, it is a maternal curse:

Keikia prakeiksmu ją  
Motinėle tikra:  
Būk prakeikta!.. Deja!  
Išdavikė dukra!

She is cursed by a curse  
Of her mother beloved:  
Be condemned!.. Alas!  
Traitor daughter you are!

The epic narration of the tale in Nėris' poem turns into a rhetoric of strong feelings, in which the curse for betrayal sounds the highest note. The sacral dimension of the text, the oppositions of archetypal

love – its betrayal – death are spared by folklore poetics, the musicality of the text, which manifests itself in many aspects. I will mention some of the most important features.

**The Musicality of Nėris' Poem “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”.** Analysing the musical depth of expression in this poem, first of all, not only the mythical images, but also the abundance and quotation of the folklores images that recur in Lithuanian folk songs stand out. According to Wolf's systemic approach, this is the so-called partial reproduction. Many of these words have diminutive forms typical of folk songs. These are labor images (“saulė, grėblelis, žvejys, dalgis, bitė, rugiai, verpimas, malūnas” [sun, bars, fisherman, father, scythe, mowers, bee, rye, spinning, mill]), wedding–lyrics (“kelias atgal, vartai, žvaigždės, paukščiai, gegutė, kregždė, gulbė, broleliai, jūra, marios, miškas, tėvelis, paukščiai, eglės” [way back, gate, stars, birds, cuckoo, swallow, swan, brothers, sea, lagoon, forest, father, birds, nurses, spruces]), calendar rites (“karklas, ąžuolas” [willow, oak]), children's songs (“vilkas, laumės, raganos, drakonai” [wolf, fairies, witches, dragons]), ballads (“karalienė, vestuvės, kelias” [queen, wedding, road]), etc. All the above mentioned genres of folk songs are associated with the most archaic forms of folklore, the mythical worldview, and the genre of ballad balances between the relics of the old faith and the newer semantics.

From the point of view of musical thematization in the poem we see almost exclusively folk musical images: “Pamergės undinės / Jų dainas dainuos” [Brides maids mermaids / Their Songs will sink]. The semantics and images of the song in the poem are usually joyful, euphoric in nature: “Eglė jiems dainuoja / Daug skambių dainų, / Kaip močia senoji / Siuntė raut linų” [Eglė sings to them / Lots of lovely songs / As by her ancient mother / Sent her tu cut linen]. The cultural image of the bell for the archaic community is the prophecy of adversity: “O varpai skenduoliai / Dindi: dan dan dan!” [And the bells are drowning / Dindi: dan dan dan!]; “Aižo girių juokas – / Kruvinas, šiurpus: / Skambina apuokas / Pragaro varpus” [The woods are broken by the laughter / Bloody and sinister, / The owl rings / The bells of inferno]. The circle dance of three fishermen's daughters at the introduction of the work: “Trys žvejų mergaitės / Sukasi ratu” [Three seamen's daughters / In circle dance]. The mention of three young fishers' daughters seems to be mirrored with the opposing emotional act at the centre of the work and becomes a fatal orgiastic rondeau performed by mythical forest creatures: “Šv. Jono naktį / Laumės ir miškiniai / Šoka ratelius.” [On the eve of St. John / Fairies and Spirits of the Woods / Dance in circles]; “Skambina paparčiuos, / Aidi per girias: – ” [Ring the bells in fern-woods, / Echoes travel far: – ]. The elements of the wheel – the motives of rotation, drilling, turning, return (“sukimosi, grėžimosi, rangymosi, raitymosi, grįžimo”) – are constantly repeated in the text.

The strophics of the poem is quatrains, the rhymes of the lines are arranged on the *abab* principle, the male and female rhymes vary depending on the semantics. Intonational-colloquial texture is achieved by syntactical parallelisms, repetitions, variation, abundance of diminutives, phonics, simple rhymic schemes typical for folk poetry. These and a few of the above mentioned folklore musical aspects make the poem sound not only in terms of melody, but also in its semantics close to the song – lyrical mythological ballad. Wolf classifies such characteristics as evocational.

**Passions as the Basis of the Musical Structural Form.** The work developed on the basis of two thematic oppositions and their transformations. The first is the theme of the land, Eglė's homeland (the renunciation of the homeland – the mystical origin of love; return to the homeland – death: a mythical transformation) and the sea (the breath of death (“skęstantys laivai” [sinking ships]) – love in Amber castle; the loss of love – death). These oppositions would correspond to the opposition of nature and culture typical of the collective universe, and to the opposition of life and death in the individual perspective. Eglė and her sons turning to trees on a sea shore brings all back to the mythical primordial origin of the world (an oak tree often embodies the tree of the universe). (In the Baltic culture a particularly high sensitivity to the tree image has survived, and it opens the archetypal depth of the tale even deeper. The forest is the “religion of the north”, and in the Baltic world it is sacred.) It is another feature that has survived the work also maintains a high value scale: breaking the word, betrayal is not forgiven in the Baltic worldview – it returns to eternal primordial being forever.

A separate and a very broad question would be the proximity of the composition of the poem to some analogue of the form of music. The general principles of composition are based on the contrasts of thematic elements and their development both in individual stanzas or their parts and in the formation of a common dynamic compositional profile. Repeating the thematic elements with a magic number 3 strengthens the dynamics of the individual parts to the culmination (“Pagrobta” [Abducted], “Žemės ilgesys” [Longing for the Land], “Išdavimas” [Betrayal], “Kur namučiai namai” [Where are the native homes]). In a sense, it is a semantic movement with rondo – like fatality. Betrayal of the loved ones – breaking an oath are the greatest offences against love, for which there is no forgiveness – neither from the divine nor from the human point of view.

Virski drebule tu! – Visais lapais drebėk! Paukštis joks nenutūps Prie tavęs, nečiulbės	Turn to aspen, a tree! – Shake your leaves all the time! Not a bird ever rests On your twigs, not a song.
Teškuos, tegu raus Vėtra plaukus piktai! Tegu lietūs išspraus Tau veidelį baltai! <...> Jums nelemta, sūnai, Augt berneliais dailiais! Jus užkeikiu nūnai: – Virskit medžiais žaliais!	May a storm in its pride Comb and torture your head! Let the rain ever wash Your small face to the white! <...> Dear sons, you will not Grow as handsome young men! I am cursing your fate: – Turn to verdurous trees!
O pačiam vidury, Užsiskleidus skara, Aš – Eglėlė niūri – Seno žvejo dukra.	And amid of you all, Covered safely by shawl, I – a spruce dark in mood – Ancient seaman`s girl-child.
Ir vienodai tamsi Vasarėlė žiema – Mėlynam liūdesy Rymosiu laukdama.	Dark in colour All year – In the sadness of blue I will wait and will stay.
Man prie šono linguos Čia sūnai milžinai – – Priešais jūra banguos Amžinai, amžinai – –	By the side my sons grow Into giants of trees – – Sea will roll its blue waves For the rest of eternity – –

By musical semiotician E. Tarasti classification in mythic musical perspective the text would acquire mystic, fantasy, heroic, mythic, etc. senses with phoric passions (Tarasti: 1979). The subtle and rich treasure of language expressing perception of nature, with its archaic feature dating back to the times of the protolanguage period, as well as the citation of folklore images reinforce the singing prosody of the poem, at the same time connect singing prosody archaic character to the mythical depths of the worldview.

The multifaceted musicality of the text (thematization, partial reproduction, evocation, intonation-syntactic melody, basics of composition, contrasts of euphoric-dysphoric passions, mythical numerology, elements of rondality, general profile of dynamic development) helps to create the sound of archetypal sacredness of this fairy tale. To refer to one of leading Lithuanian folklore researcher Donatas Sauka, “in each episode is so full of mood and poetic warmth that “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” remains an unsurpassed work

of this kind in Lithuanian literature, naively sincere and simple as all folk art, just and human as a really great art” (Sauka 2070: 265). Such multi-layeredness of semantics, folklore, mythological archaisms, depth of passions, poetic musicality of Salomėja Nėris' poem was one of the reasons that determined the popularity of the work and its numerous productions on the Lithuanian stage.

### “EGLĖ, THE QUEEN OF SERPENTS“ ON THE STAGE

“Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” at the Puppet Theaters. Puppet Theater opened in Vilnius in 1941, it attempted to build its repertoire on the basis of folk art from the very start<sup>1</sup>. The tale “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” (dir. by Mykolė Krinickaitė, chor. by Jonas Vilutis, music taken from M. K. Čiurlionis works) was chosen for the premiere production. “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”, in part, reflected the emphasis on the folk culture characteristic of socialist realism, as well as the concept of pedagogical values of that time. The heroes of the work are tried to be measured by the criteria of socialist realism (common working people – fishermen), a clear opposition between good and evil is presented, the plot of the tale can be perceived in the plane of realism. A. Liepinis writes about this staging in the official daily of Soviet Lithuania “Tiesa” [The truth]: “Launching its activity with the performance “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”, the theater is just beginning to operate along the chosen path of folk art <...>, because “it contains deep fantasies and life-like realism” (quot. from Kapočiūtė, 2005, p. 194).

In 1948, a new version of the play was staged based on Nėris' poem (dir. Balys Lukošius, comp. Valentinas Baumilas, art dir. Romualdas Lukšas). The Performance Review Commission of the Board of Arts under the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR (artist Vytautas Palaima, actor Mečys Chadaravičius, director Juozas Šeinas) after sitting the review criticized the performance for the boring music, which was long, for motionless, knobby puppets, for monotonous duration of the play, poor lighting, for difficult to hear text, etc. The director tried to respond to the criticism:

The features of the folk tale are preserved. The interpretative direction chosen is correct. There can be no special rejoice in this work, because it is an epic piece and its mood must be solemn. Čiurlionis' music was adapted for the production, which was not and is not boring or monotonous. I agree to correct some technical details and mise-en-scène (quoted from Kapočiūtė, 2005, p. 194).

After correcting the drawbacks, the play was given a new review. After it, the discussion focused on ideological meaning, the question was raised whether the concept of keeping the promise was treated ambiguously. Juozas Banaitis, chairman of the board of the Art Council at that time, said: “We need to emphasize the loyalty point, otherwise we will lose the pedagogical moment. Eglė kept her word and the children didn't have to break their words” (ibid.). On the other hand, the assessment of value standards by a Lithuanian communist J. Banaitis differed from the Soviet ideology promoted common admiration of the “heroic” Pavlik Morozov who betrayed his parents by telling of them to the officials. Banaitis' internal value relationship with his relatives was traditional for Lithuanians – it is a requirement of love and respect. On March 29, 1949, the theater was liquidated by order of the head of the Board of Arts. The performance meantime was shown on stage for 6 months (premiered in October).

In 1958 “Lėlė” theater also starts its life with the production of “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” (directed by B. Lukošius, choreography by Jonas Surkevičius, also using the music of M. K. Čiurlionis). The dolls were heavy, naturalistic, even natural hair was used. The reviewer of the performance, Marija Macijauskienė, gave a detailed review of the created roles, emphasized good “vocal material”, praised the scenography, the types of puppets that “correspond to the national style” (“Kauno tiesa” [Kauna's truth] daily, 1958). The reviewer V. Šilis stated that this adaptation of Nėris' work for the stage of the puppet theater “preserved an extremely beautiful lyricism of the poem” (“Literatūra ir menas” newspaper, 1958). Vytautas Baršys, Assistant Director of the Vilnius Puppet Theater and Head of the Pedagogical Part, mentioned that the performance “is

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the Lithuanian puppet theater begins with 15th century.

presented as a singing folk poem, expressing the great spiritual strength of folk people”, but other critics were most struck by the deviations from naturalism, for example, “the imprecise waves of the sea – from left to the right” or the cuckoo’s sound, which was compared to the screeching of an unknown bird” (Macijauskienė, quot. from Kapočiūtė 2005).

In 1968 “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” was staged at Kaunas State Puppet Theater (dir. St. Ratkevičius, designer Vitalijus Mazūras, composer Eduardas Balsys), it is considered to be the beginning of a new creative approach in the history of the Lithuanian Puppet Theater (after ten years of stage life the play was renewed in 1978). The play used music from the ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” by Eduard Balsys, created in 1960 (the dance of Eglė’s return home from the ballet was included in the puppet play). According to a theater critic Girdzijauskaitė, these performances marked the dividing line between the old and the new puppet theater: the theater finally abandoned the principles of imitational theater, and Nėris’s poem acquired an epic sound thanks to the efforts of the creators of the performance (quot. from Kapočiūtė, 2005). Thus, although the directors of the puppet theaters tried to adapt “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” to the requirements of the imitative theater characteristic of socialist realism, the selection of the work itself, the ideology of the tale demonstrated the non-conformist views of the artists.

It is symptomatic that not only for the first performances of puppet theaters Nėris’ poem “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”) was chosen, the semantics of which in the 1960s and later had additional connotations (Lithuanian loss of independence, Soviet occupation, gulags, exile, ideological persecution, longing for the past, partisans – Brothers of the Forest). It is also symptomatic that the music of M. K. Čiurlionis, which is very dear to Lithuanians and which reveals an archaic worldview, was chosen for the first productions, and later the music of the composer E. Balsys as if elevating national theme and placing the old Lithuanian culture up and front was accepted as paramount symbol of the longing for freedom.

So though the principles of the socialist realism prevailed, repeated productions of the old mythological tale on the stage spoke of different values, foreign to ideologized politics. In the productions of the poem national identity was emphasized, it revealed the archetypal depths of national sameness, exalted eternal spiritual values, and cursed betrayal. All these accents interacted with the social issues of love for the fatherland, relatives, loyalty and betrayal. (In the Soviet times, the concept of fatherland was not applicable to Lithuania, in particular, but only to the Soviet Union as a whole: Lithuania was called “gimtasis kraštas” [native land], “tėviškė” [homestead]. Such multiple stagings of the Lithuanian mythological tale – Nėris’ poem – a kind of epic story – radiated ignoring of the Soviet realism to a degree and showed silent resistance to the Soviet ideology.

**Eduardas Balsys’ ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” (1960).** S. Nėris’ poem was instrumental in popularizing the folk tale, as well as Balsys’ ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” based on the poem plot, and it stood 5 different stagings in different theatres by various ballet masters. Balsys himself acknowledged that the ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” was his favorite work. In this ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” the plot (the ballet consists of a prologue, four parts and an epilogue) slightly deviates from the plot of a folk tale or a poem by Nėris, it is adapted to the more common canons of the stage. For example, the piece begins with the Serpent Žilvinas’ Dance – a rage during storms and tempests. Eglė’s sisters leave her alone with the serpent and she vows to marry him after a long dance with the serpent. The customary law is traceable here – the chief snake – the matchmaker – addresses the parents. Parents deceive the serpents only once, not three times or twice. Dances take place at the wedding party: dances of pearls, of mermaids, etc. The ballet especially highlights the story of the desire for love, mutual happiness and its loss, and the respective solo dances of Žilvinas and Eglė and their duets are dedicated to this theme. (Some critics even claim that this is a kind of variant of Lithuanian Romeo and Juliet.) To some extent, this emphasis on passion diminishes the dimension of sacredness, the ballet is more reminiscent of a beautiful fairy tale, on the other hand, it speaks of supreme, eternal values.

The music of ballet combines folk instruments and motifs of folk songs. Although the sea is in the Western part of Lithuania, the motifs of monodic folk songs from Eastern part, Dzūkija, are heard. Elements of Lithuanian polyphonic “sutartinės” songs are also used in the dance of the brothers, but these sacred ritual songs traditionally are performed only by women. The mythical aspect, through the melody of folk songs, simply transfers to the dimension of the level of a somewhat Europeanized folk tale. However, bearing in mind the socio-cultural situation of the Soviet time, the popularity of ballet was determined by semantical archetypal depths and melodies, indirectly spoke about the old Lithuanian culture and radiated love for one's country. And it is this thread that, through the music, gives the ballet a shift towards the depths of the archetypal worldview.

The ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” was staged 5 times, including 2 stagings in the Soviet period. The first interpretation took place in 1960 (choreographer Valentinas Grivickas), he was awarded the LSSR State Prize in 1960, and in 1965 – film-ballet was produced (dir. Algimantas Mockus, V. Grivickas)<sup>1</sup>. The second time was in 1976 (choreographer ELEGIJUS Bukaitis). Grivickas' version was more tradition based, the dancers were dressed in national costumes. Grivickas was a strong supporter of drama type ballet, with the main focus on the development of the plot and the performance of the dancers. And extravagant experimentations of Bukaitis (artistic director Rimtautas Gibavičius, conductor Ch. Potašinskas) did not connect with the tempered modernity of E. Balsys (Šabasevičius 2006). Neither Grivickas' (1960) nor Bukaitis' (1976) interpretations of Balsys' music satisfied Balsys himself (Žiūraitytė, 2019). He had advanced beyond realistic vision of Grivickas' staging concept (an artistic director Juozas Jankus, a conductor Chaimas Potašinskas) and experiments of Bukaitis.

In post-Soviet period the ballet was produced again. The third interpretation of Balsys' ballet was staged by Egidijus Domeika<sup>2</sup>, in 1995. Domeika's choreographic drawings, based on classical, neoclassical dance and on respect for music, seemed unpretentiously “universal”, but in some places lacked coherence and logic (Žiūraitytė, 2019). The fourth attempt was in 2015 by a Brit George Williamson. He provoked the use of realistic attributes and mise-en-scènes: knives, scythes, rakes, fists, an ax killing on the stage; rural carriage rolls, “true” snakes creep<sup>3</sup>, etc. Such stylistics repels, and is completely unacceptable to the poetic Lithuanian worldview and subtle folk eroticism. The critics also drew attention to the extravagant color combinations in the scenography that hindered the perception of the symbiosis of dance and music (Žiūraitytė, 2015). The fifth version was produced in 2019 by Martynas Rimeikis<sup>4</sup>, in Klaipėda State Musical Theater. In 2020 it was awarded the Golden Stage Cross, in 2021 showed on Mezzo channel<sup>5</sup>. In the words of Rimeikis, “here the theme of love is the key theme”. In this ballet ethnographic elements are presented in a minimalist way, not visible from clothing. He especially highlighted passion, universalized, modernized the dance language. These interpretations of Balsys' ballet and the composer's relationship with them have been widely discussed in the press (Šabasevičius, Apanavičienė, etc.). The choreographer combines the emotionally dramatic content encoded in Balsys' ballet with contemporary dance, which provides meaning to the vitality of the music that has become classical. Rimeikis' version gives a new synergetic quality to the ballet (Žiūraitytė 2019). It is interesting, that Balsys' student Laimis Vilkončius on the basis of libretto (1976) composed by Sigitas Geda, a poet and a playwright, in 1997 wrote a rock opera “Eglė...” (it was staged in 2018). In this libretto the poet recreated the content of the popular folk tale so much as to transfer its philosophical concept to the cosmic level, emphasizing the problems of human relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Dir. Algirdas Araminas documentary about staging of Eduardas Balsys ballet “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents”, 1960. <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/6943?embed> [accessed 2023 07 26].

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iisIm2FTZGc&list=RDzse0vYJoty0&index=2> [accessed 2023 06 28].

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.zmones.lt/galerija/eduardo-balsio-baletas-egle-zalciu-karaliene.a198563e-94c9-11e8-9f90-aa000054c883> [accessed 12 August 2023].

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo8FAKQZKbY> [accessed 25 August 2023].

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zse0vYJoty0> [accessed 15 August 2023].



The five productions of Balsys' ballet "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents" testify to the difficult process of the development of Lithuanian art and history in the Soviet period and later, the changing scale of choreographic art values from dramatic ballet to dance theater, establishing the synergetic quality of such works. In summary, Balsys' ballet "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents" is "a vibrant phenomenon of the musical culture of the time, characterized by such an artistic level that can claim eternity" (Žiūraitytė, 2019).

Both puppet theater performances and repeated ballet productions in the Soviet era and later show a unique, non-conformist attitude of artists independent of state ideology, their deep self, manifested as love for the culture and freedom of their country. It was not a direct resistance, but an internal posture of the relationship with the Soviet occupation.

### GENERALIZATON

The Lithuanian folk tale "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents" is among the best known in Lithuanian culture and is equally revelatory now as was in the past. It received a special popular status after a poem by the same title written by Salomeja Nėris was published. It stood several stagings in Lithuanian puppet theaters. The ballet written by E. Balsys has also received several stage productions during its 60 years of existence (twice during the Soviet period). The tale is narrated in stained glass works, sculptures, a rock opera, films and animated films, and mystery performances, too. This presentation looks into the reasons of the popularity of this folk tale, the expression of the archetypal worldview in the works of S. Nėris and E. Balsys.

S. Nėris in her poem not only retained the elements of the folklore tale, but further ritualized it. She reinforced the expression of mythical images, emphasizing custom law, use of mythical numerology, reinforcing contrasts of euphoric and dysphoric passions. The dimension of mythical sacredness is enhanced by the musicality of the poem, which manifests itself starting from the rich images of folk songs, vocabulary of diminutives, archaic strophics, syntactic-intonation phonics, elements of musical thematization, archetypal principles of repetition and variation – all leading to a fatalism of a rondeau. The harmony of the above-mentioned mythological elements, the archaic worldview, the poetic musicality gives the text density and enriches its existential archetypal level.

The productions of "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents" on the stage of the puppet theaters were marked by the spiritual resistance to the ideology of that time. Although there was an attempt to comply with the requirements of the socialist realism method, this tale is an expression of the characteristic archetypal national secularism, which speaks of eternal values, resistant to the political requirements of political ideology. Multiple productions of the mythological folk tale genre together with the tragic ending emphasized the destructiveness of betrayal and were a kind of artistic resistance to the "happy life of soviet people".

The music of the ballet written by Balsys is characterized by multiple variants in the structure of the text performed by the composer himself, as well as different interpretations on the theater stage. These interpretations differ depending on the socio-cultural situation of the staging period, the perception of the national perspective, the emphasis on passion, the intersection of traditional and modern choreography, and the talent of scenographers. Soviet-era productions were characterized by either realistic imitation or exaggerated modernist pursuits. The canons of ballet art imposed a partial abandonment of mythical numerology, leaving only the main plot elements, introducing statically general dances, emphasizing passion.

The music of E. Balsys' ballet is expressive, it has a rich coloring – it uses Lithuanian folk instruments, the melody of folk songs, the rhythm of folk polyphonic singing, the dramatic principle of symphony, the system of leitmotifs. S. Nėris' poetry affects us through mythological semantics, passion dynamics, archetypal worldview, and Balsys' ballet is deservedly considered to have opened a new era in the national

ballet. Various and repeated productions of the folk tale “Eglė, the Queen of Serpents” on stage were an expression of the non-conformist attitude of the artists towards the Soviet ideology.

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