

Fire and Ice

A review of the play *Fire in the Temple*

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The year 2023 marks a significant step in anthroposophical history: for the first time, Rudolf Steiner has been portrayed in a mainstream movie.

The film is Lasse Hallstrom's production of *Hilma*, based on the life of the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, an artist who felt herself deeply connected to Steiner. The feminist slant of the movie necessitates lumping Steiner together with many misogynist males who stand in the way of Hilma's acceptance as an artist (although he actually helped her along her path).

And while actor Tom Wlaschiha's blue eyes and dapper suits detract from the historical accuracy of his rendering, it is nonetheless astonishing to see any version of Rudolf Steiner (and, for a moment, the First Goetheanum!) on the big screen at all.



Fortunately, by way of an antidote, this year will also witness the portrayal of Rudolf Steiner on the stage of a new drama, *The Fire in the Temple*, written by Glen Williamson and directed by John McManus.

The play will have seven premiere performances in Harlemville, NY, Chestnut Ridge, NY, and Kimberton, PA (see below for ticketing information). It is the result of many months of collaborative work with the writer, director, and the community of actors, speech artists, and eurythmists who have been presenting dramatic readings and previews to small audiences.

The action of the play spans the years beginning New Year's Eve, 1923, when the First Goetheanum was destroyed by arson, to 1925, when Rudolf Steiner died, possibly as the result of poisoning.

Although reference is often made to the stormy events transpiring in Europe that were to alter the course of world history, the play's focus is on the interplay of Rudolf Steiner with his wife, Marie Steiner, his physician, Ita Wegman, and his colleagues, Albert Steffen, Gunther Wachsmuth, and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. In the spirit of "parte repraesentans totem," even these spiritually attuned relationships have their share of turbulence.

Those years of "anthroposophical history," so filled with remarkable achievement in the face of ineluctable tragedy, would in themselves present a insuperable challenge to any dramatic encapsulation. In the spirit of Steiner's *Mystery Dramas*, Williamson also expands the audience's vistas by millennia, as we witness the karma that is being played out at significant junctures on the stage.



This is a daunting task for a stage play: even the vast cinematic skills of the Wakowskis in their film *The Cloud Atlas*, or the charming and gifted acting found in Emile Ardolino's movie, *Chances Are*, have been profoundly challenged when trying to bring reincarnation to the screen.

Williamson and McManus eschew the FX and guide their audience in breathing in Time, effecting an experience of contraction in the present life and expansion into past incarnations.

Audience members may find themselves initially confused as Ita Wegman merges into the being of Alexander the Great, or Albertus Magnus transforms into Marie Steiner, and the characters on stage initially share in that confusion.

As the play progresses, however, the audience has the opportunity to viscerally experience what it means to awaken to the joys, sorrows, and profound responsibilities of one's past lives as Rudolf Steiner guides those closest to him to the threshold of self knowledge.

It is only natural to assume that a play in which Rudolf Steiner is the protagonist would verge on hagiography, but that is not the case. Williamson walks the fine line between Steiner the Initiate and Steiner the human being, even the playful human being who delights in playing a silly game with one of his proteges. Indeed, that fine line is the play's "open secret" and is the mainspring of its most compelling drama. As Ita Wegman's consciousness expands, Steiner tells her:

"The old mysteries are fading. But new mysteries can now be built on karmic relationships. . . It would be good if more people could wake up to these connections — and also grasp their own karmic threads."

That these relationships can only be brought to resolution and harmony by human beings incarnated in physical bodies is a revelation often forgotten by those closest to Steiner. Cataclysmic as the burning of the Goetheanum was, as the play proceeds that tragedy fades into the background.

The greater tragedy, we realize, is that those nearest to Steiner fall short of recognizing their connectedness — not only to their teacher, but to one another. We might imagine that coming to experience our past lives and karmic relationships would open new vistas of social harmony, but that still requires effort.

In dialogues that are tragicomic in their intensity, Williamson portrays individuals like Albert Steffen and Marie Steiner expressing their corrosive jealousy towards not only the present-day Ita Wegman, but of her past identities as well. (From my own conversations with elderly people who knew all the figures in this play, Williamson's depictions are, alas, historically accurate.)

Standing at the place where the fire began, Steiner insists, "In spiritual work, there is no failure, only diversion and delay. We will build again," and so the monumental task of erecting the Second Goetheanum begins.

Given his respect for the freedom of others, Steiner could not make such a resolution concerning his students' sympathies and antipathies towards one another — those fires would not so easily quench. It is ironic that even though his colleagues keep close watch over one another's interactions with their teacher, their rivalries blind them to the appearance of a figure at a public gathering who slips poison into Steiner's tea.

The progressive forces helping the anthroposophical impulse are portrayed through the eurythmic movements of the Archangel Michael, and the oppositional forces are represented as "Green Demons" who slither on and off the stage at critical moments. John McManus' staging of these demonic appearances will likely make it clear that the demons are not the cause of the hindrances and errors that are underway, but rather are the effects of the human beings' unconscious decisions.

Although the play begins, as the title promises, with the luciferic conflagration of the Goetheanum fire, it concludes on a different, colder, and more ahrimanic note. As Robert Frost once wrote,

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice . . .
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.



Williamson does not hesitate to indicate that the external attacks on Steiner and his teachings — even those staged by a powerful Brotherhood — were not the greatest obstacles that he faced.

Steiner understood it was the all-too human failings of those nearest and dearest to him that sapped his vital forces and were to have a calamitous effect on the future of the movement he founded. As Steiner crosses the Threshold, it appears likely that the rivalries will continue to hinder the visionary impetus of Ita Wegman, the most sympathetic figure in the drama. *Fire in the Temple* concludes with the gathering of human and spiritual beings around Steiner's deathbed, a scene filled with despair, Michaelic resolve — and ambivalence.

Why should a Waldorf teacher see this play?

The 2020s have not been very kind to Rudolf Steiner and some of what he created or founded. From his denunciation by AWSNA in 2020 to the “de-colonizing” evisceration of the Waldorf curriculum to be completed in 2025, Steiner is less of a presence and ever more of a spectre in the American Waldorf movement.

For those teachers whose schools are disassociating themselves from Rudolf Steiner, *Fire in the Temple* may serve as a vivid and moving re-introduction to the man and his work, and to the urgency of his teachings about karma. For those who are avid readers of Steiner's books and lectures but are less familiar with the people close to him at the end of his life, *Fire in the Temple* may be a reminder of the enormous challenges and obstacles Steiner faced before his death.

As a documentary, a comedy of manners, a tragedy, and a Mystery Drama woven into one, *Fire in the Temple* stands as a unique contemplation of the centrality of Rudolf Steiner in our time.

Fire in the Temple

World Premiere September 15 - 24

Tickets: anthropostheater.com/Fire-in-the-Temple/#Buy-Tickets