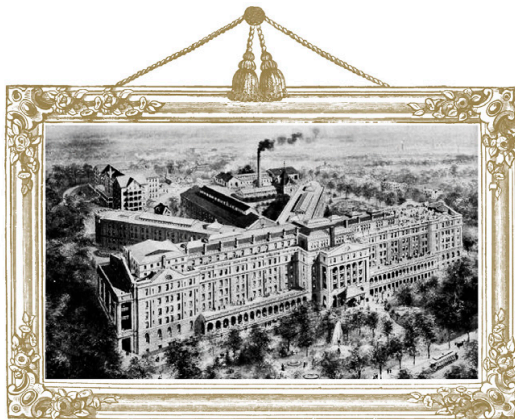


FROM THE STAGE DIRECTOR

As our world shrank around us in 2020, many of us embarked on newly detailed explorations - of our own homes, of our bodies, of the internet, or of our minds - in our urge to scale our worlds back to familiar human proportions. Sometimes this kind of exploration is constructive, leading to new insight. And sometimes it's destructive, dragging us back into dark spaces that we've done well to compartmentalise. Anyone who's embarked on a process of therapy - physical or psychological- is cautioned that the process may be painful. But once begun, how do you know how much pain is justified for the anticipated goal? When the pain of growth feels like it's beyond what we can bear, how far can we push ourselves, to justify the pain we've already put ourselves through? When is pain a sign of progress, and when is it just...painful...?

Throughout history, people have voluntarily subjected themselves to painful or even dangerous ordeals, with the promise of an ambiguous reward at the end. Think of Tamino's trials for love, Siddhartha's years of asceticism for enlightenment, or any reality show contestants' humiliation for attention. In this model, people who can and can't afford it, have subjected themselves voluntarily to all sorts of horrifying treatments in the name of self-improvement.

Bluebeard's Castle is frequently described as a *psychological* drama - a journey through the dark spaces of someone's mind, a process of psychoanalysis. At the turn of the last century, when Hungary was still ruled by the Habsburg monarchy, it was the first country outside Germany and Austria with a substantial following for psychoanalysis. The "Budapest School" was led by the charming, charismatic Sándor Ferenczi, on whom our *Bluebeard* is based. Ferenczi considered the psychoanalytic process a mutual, interactive relationship, as opposed to Freud's neutral analysis. Ferenczi felt the therapist should be actively empathetic, sharing relevant experiences of his own. Freud coined the term transference, wherein a patient inevitably falls in love with their therapist. Freud might say that Ferenczi let his countertransference run wild, sleeping with not one but two of his patients - a daughter and a mother. (He eventually married the mother!)



In our production, *Bluebeard's Castle* is a "medical spa" or sanitarium, the sort of high-end hospital-cum-hotel that peppered Europe and the US from the 1870s until the start of World War I (the "Cure Era"). These sanitariums were often built by bringing pseudo-medical equipment into a stately home. They catered to the real or imagined ailments of wealthy clientele who voluntarily

subjected themselves to horrific and often very dangerous treatments. (Some famous examples are Dr. Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium, or Saranac Lake, where Bartok himself died.) Dr. Bluebeard runs this castle as a pseudoscientific cult figure, surrounded by his devotees. He treats his patients by leading them in an exploration of the darkest corners of their own minds: a guided tour of their own imagination. He displays and analyses their fantasies through a mind-reading machine - a head clamp, reminiscent of that used for electro convulsive therapy, which Ferenczi pioneered.

When the patient wears this clamp, Dr. Bluebeard, his Deputy Judith, and his Nurses are able to see a projection of the patient's fantasies. Bluebeard is assisted by his experienced and trusted Deputy, who is his assumed successor, and three devoted Nurses, all former Patients themselves.

Our patient, also having taken the name Judith, comes to Bluebeard's Castle, leaving his relationships and possessions behind, determined to undergo Bluebeard's treatment, because he is devoted to Bluebeard's ideology. The Treatment begins as it has hundreds of times before, displaying the Patient's imaginatory response to a series of cue words. The Patient continually reaffirms his consent to Bluebeard, that he wishes to move forward. This time, however, something is different. Something is off. This Patient bleeds. He has a physical response to what should be a purely emotional process. This response demonstrates devotion unlike that of any previous Patient, moving Bluebeard in a way he has never experienced. The boundaries blur, then dissolve. Dr. Bluebeard abandons protocol. And with it, his authority. The Treatment process spins wildly out of control; the Castle is compromised.

The Deputy institutes emergency measures, seizing control by plunging the Patient into a water treatment - anything to disrupt the pathological relationship exploding between Dr. Bluebeard and his Patient Judith. This, finally, is too much for the Patient. He had respected the mystery of the Treatment for the sake of Dr. Bluebeard, whom he idolised. But Dr. Bluebeard is now revealed to be just a man, and the Patient demands to know what this has all been for. Dr. Bluebeard begs him not to question.

With the complete breakdown of Bluebeard's charismatic power, the Deputy demands that the Seventh Door be opened...the Door meant to unveil the Treatment's final result, the cure for it all. But what this exposes is that there is no Seventh Door. There was no real cure because there was no real illness. The Castle existed only to propagate itself. Dr. Bluebeard was the Wizard of Oz, the emperor with no clothes; he exists as he does only because his former patients, his Nurses, his Wives, allowed him to. It was their imaginations that built this Castle. When they stop, he stops. The castle stops.

Now it will always be night.

JULIA MINTZER