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# Armenian genocide, Irish Gothic infuse international arts fest

By **Robert Hurwitt** Updated 2:35 pm, Monday, May 25, 2015



Aleksandra Kotecka (left), Ditte Berkeley and Simona Sala of Teatr Zar in "Armine, Sister."

Sonorous and plaintive, ancient Armenian chants wrap around the explosively physical performances in Teatr Zar's "Armine, Sister." Quirky and richly metaphoric, **Aine Ryan**'s "Kitty in the Lane" twists its way into another notable entry in the classic Irish rural Gothic genre.

The two shows couldn't be more different, but they have some things in common besides having been performed Sunday at Fort Mason. Both are American premieres. And both are among the higher profile offerings at this year's much-expanded San Francisco International Arts Festival.

Ryan, a fresh new Irish voice, is making her U.S. debut with "Kitty," a critic's choice at last year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival and currently on international tour.

Produced by her Studio Perform, it's an exceptionally promising first piece for the 22-year-old actor-playwright. But it has some typical first-time-out flaws, particularly in performance.

Ryan is a magnetic and versatile presence, but her vocal patterns — particularly her use of pauses — are repetitive and her diction can get fuzzy, a problem for American audiences when you're working in a regional Irish accent. Most of this is nothing that a good director couldn't fix (none is credited). She has the skill to give her writing the acting it deserves. That's what's most memorable about "Kitty." Ryan, as the young woman running a remote family farm, spins an ever-more-grisly tale with seductively easy grace while waiting for her boyfriend to pick her up. Despite the welcome results of its referendum on same-sex marriage, "Kitty" probes how far the country has to go to achieve full gender equality.

"Armine" is even more directly issue-focused — on the Armenian genocide specifically and, more inclusively, the legacy of such conflicts in the Middle East. But also on how such horrors persist or are buried in our cultural memory. You need some context, however, to know that, provided by the program and, on opening night, by the director's more informative curtain speech. Zar, Poland's widely influential Grotowski-based experimental company, works extensively with ancient song patterns, exploring them vocally and adding layers of meaning through devised movement. There's no text.

The hauntingly sung Armenian songs, led by a vibrant Aram Kerovpyan, establish the depth and poignancy of the tone, and the subject matter — especially for those, such as the Armenian woman sitting next to me, who know them by heart. A few gorgeously rendered Persian and Kurdish songs broaden the scope. Other elements may be more open to interpretation than the creators intend. The many columns standing on the long set (with the audience seated on both sides) made me think of classical temples, rather than the Armenian church they're supposed to evoke.

But there's no mistaking the vivid theatricality of the intensely focused physical explorations of cycles of inhumane degradation, violence, shattered psyches and rueful memories, tempered with genuine attempts to comfort or care for each other. The extraordinary Ditte Berkeley and Simona Sala anchor a riveting ensemble of women and men — many at times stripped to the waist — filling Zar's desert temple installation with images of crashing bodies, cascading sand, men felling columns, imprisonment, imperiled babies and, yes, pomegranates.

“Armine,” the program tells us, represents Zar’s first attempt to add narrative to its work, unlike the more abstract “Gospels of Childhood” it brought to the festival in 2011. It would be hard to suss out an actual story. But as a tone poem, “Armine” has an unmistakably strong message and a richly expressive dramatic arc.

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**Armine, Sister:** Experimental drama. Created by Teatr Zar. Directed by Jaroslaw Fret. Through May 30. San Francisco International Arts Festival, Herbst Pavilion, Fort Mason, S.F. 90 minutes. \$30. (800) 838-3006. [www.sfiarf.org](http://www.sfiarf.org).



**Kitty in the Lane:** Solo drama. Written and performed by Áine Ryan. Through June 6. San Francisco International Arts Festival, **Southside Theater**, Building D, Fort Mason, S.F. 90 minutes. \$20-\$25. (800) 838-3006. [www.sfiarf.org](http://www.sfiarf.org).

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