

# **Sound in Motion:**

## **An Investigation into the Works of Poland's Theatre ZAR**

by  
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Theatre ZAR is an exciting new theatrical force in Poland and in the international sphere. Jaroslaw Fret, Artistic Director of Theatre ZAR, is an energetic, passionate leader shaping and focusing the talent of a young ensemble of actors. Death, mourning, suicide, ritual and resurrection are essential themes in Theatre ZAR's two works to date: *Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood* and *Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide*. But perhaps the most unifying element of the group's developing repertory is the theatricalization of liturgical chant or singing. My introduction to the work of Theatre ZAR consisted of a four day immersion as part of one of the Grotowski Institute's many Key Projects (or festivals) entitled "Openings\*Winter" (December, 2007). This festival served as a multi-layered collision between past and present in which the youth of Theatre ZAR reinvigorated a two thousand year old Georgian tradition of singing funeral music. "Openings\*Winter" showcased the direct lineage of Jerzy Grotowski right at the source of inspiration and creation, the home of the Laboratory Theatre in Wroclaw.

Jarolsaw Fret is a former member of the highly acclaimed Polish company, Gardzienice Theatre Association (founded by Grotowski collaborator, Włodzimierz Staniewski, in 1977). The work of Gardzienice places high value on the aural and acoustic elements of song in theatrical performance. Staniewski and his company members travel to remote villages, mostly in Poland, in order to preserve the dying oral and aural traditions of singing and performance. Gardzienice engages the village in a "gathering" in which the company shares pieces from their own repertoire in exchange for performances from the repertoire of the villagers. Staniewski calls the process of collecting songs, rituals, gestures and stories from indigenous cultures an "expedition". Jarolsaw Fret joined Gardzienice when he was twenty years old. He left the group after a year and a half but has continued in the tradition of his former company while developing his own aesthetic and fundamental beliefs on deep immersion and contact with a particular culture during the process of song collection. He believes that conducting an "expedition" is merely the beginning of a long-term relationship with a particular culture or tradition. "Our approach in terms of research or digging for material and trying to get in deep contact with a person or group of people and the traditions from which we are taking the material is different from Gardzienice because we are not traveling and searching for inspiration...we are not a theatre group at that moment. We are trying to maintain deep contact—and we are coming back again and again many times...not just to go and take something, leave and create. We try to imbed ourselves in the culture."

Both Włodzimierz Staniewski and Jaroslaw Fret have been greatly influenced by the life work and teachings of Polish theatre director and intellectual, Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski passed away in 1999; however, his teachings are still pervasive all over the

world and his influence can still be seen in the creations of many who have been touched by his work. Because of Grotowski's profound affect on the theatre world, various branches of his "family tree" have emerged. Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Andre Gregory, Richard Schechner, as well as countless other theatre makers and ensemble companies count Grotowski as an influence and inspiration. Thomas Richards serves as the Director of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy. Grotowski considered Richards his "essential collaborator" and, through a rigorous process of "transmission", made Richards the heir to his research; particularly the Art as vehicle research he was conducting toward the end of his life. Jaroslaw Fret constitutes yet another branch of the family tree. Fret is the Director of the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, Poland (the Institute building was the home of the Laboratory Theatre from 1965 until 1982). While Richards' branch seeks to continue Grotowski's work and research toward the end of his life, Fret is responsible for running an institute that is devoted to carrying on the legacy of Grotowski as a man of the theatre by creating access to his performances, writings, and the work of his descendants to the public. Fret uses the Grotowski Institute as a place to develop outreach for the ideas and theories of Grotowski, but he tests those ideas and theories and puts them into practice through his work with Theatre ZAR.

Fret founded Theatre ZAR in 2002. Theatre ZAR takes its name from the particular form of Georgian funeral singing, called ZAR, which inspires their work. From 1999-2003 the ensemble traveled to the Georgian Republic, Bulgaria and Greece to collect songs and make direct, intimate contact with the various peoples and cultures. But it was the many encounters and exchanges with the Svaneti people, who live in the highest part of the Caucasus mountains, and their tradition of preserving funeral songs that most influenced Fret and his company.

"ZAR is actually quite well known if you study ethnomusicology. I used to come to music institutes in Berlin and Vienna to study and gain knowledge about ZAR. From the very beginning I was thinking about Georgia and Georgian traditions—I met ZAR and found ZAR...I remember I made a copy of it in my tapes. But I don't think I understood at that time what ZAR was—I almost forgot about this song or the completed songs, funeral songs. I had no idea about what this could be and how it could be used. But when we went to Svaneti, it hit me very hard and I understood that ZAR, which is two thousand years old, is absolutely anonymous and protected by this certain group of people, which is completely unique. And in thinking about theatre that is made out of music, ZAR could be not only the main metaphor (this is why we use ZAR as our name) but could also be crucial for our work as material and technique. Because ZAR is not only the structure of music, the structure of melodies or counterpoint, disharmonic counterpoint, but it's mostly the structure of breathing. The breath is the fundamental way in which we live and communicate with the world; how we are part of the world and part of any society...how we are part of life. That is why ZAR, being sung as a funeral ceremony, gives you a very deep, essential understanding of what the process of life and tradition of life, including death, is."

ZAR is considered the oldest form of polyphony in Georgia and possibly the oldest in the world. Fret describes ZAR as, "a column of breathing, a spiritual column, on which the

soul climbs to the heavens...it's a social lamentation sung by a huge choir of men over and over for hours during the funeral.”

Although *Gospels of Childhood* and *Caesarean Section* share similarities in theme, the two pieces are strikingly different in structure and mood. *Gospels of Childhood* was the group's first collaboration as a company. Fret and various members of Theatre ZAR spent three years in a phase of ethno sonic research and collection before first showing the piece as a work in progress during the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Gardzienice. The performance officially premiered in 2003 in Brzezinka, the former forest base of Grotowski and his Laboratory Theatre. During the “Openings\*Winter” festival, *Gospels of Childhood* was shown again in Brzezinka (directly after a successful run of the production in Los Angeles as part of the UCLA Live International Theatre Festival).

*Gospels of Childhood* weaves together songs from the funeral tradition of ZAR; liturgical songs from the Orthodox Republic of Monks, Athos; Bulgarian folk songs; Polish funeral songs; texts from the gospels of Mary Magdalene, Philip, and Thomas; and fragments by Dostoyevsky and Simone Weil. The text serves as stepping-stones moving the audience from one section of the piece to the next. It is used in collage fashion and often comes in the middle of a song or at the very end. Unlike more traditional works, the text in *Gospels of Childhood* does not serve to illuminate any particular story line or character. Instead, it is treated as an element in support of the music. Fret describes the process of working on *Gospels of Childhood* as not merely attempting to breathe life into theoretical text but engaging in a slow discovery of the real task behind the company's work.

“Gospels of Childhood as a performance and ZAR as a group is a kind of cultural project in which we want to underline the fundamental question of the presence of the human being on the earth as a vessel for memory. We deal with questions of what it means to remember. Not memory in terms of gigabytes of information, but memory that is written into our bodies...we are a vessel for the past and for the future. Memory is also written in songs of the past, songs like ZAR. Hundreds of generations of people created and shaped these songs. We investigate memories that have been hidden in our lives since our first breath. The real reason we, humans, are here on this Earth is transmission. Art itself also contains a fundamental question of transmission. The real question for us is what kind of artistic transmission can be made in the theatre using ZAR and other such traditions.”

Because of the ritualistic, intimate nature of Theatre ZAR's work, audience size is limited. A Theatre ZAR experience begins even before you enter the performance space. Every moment preceding the performance is carefully considered, constructed and made part of the event. On the second day of the festival I (along with roughly thirty five audience members) embarked on an hour-long bus ride from Wroclaw's Old Market Square to a specific point along a forest edge on the outskirts of Olesnica. Upon arrival we were led down a muddy path, deep into the woods, by two people carrying torches. We finally came to a clearing and saw a charming lodge lit by candles in the many windows with smoke billowing out of the brick chimney. This was Brzezinka. We

escaped the bitter December cold and entered a warm room heated by a fireplace. Two large picnic tables lined with cups of freshly brewed hot tea welcomed us. Copies of the synopsis of *Gospels of Childhood* also covered the tables but came with strict instruction not to bring them into the performance. After some time we were escorted away from our cups of tea to the back part of the lodge where we waited in front of a huge set of wooden doors listening to faint waves of choral singing. Once the double doors were opened, the sound of a hymn washed over us. We processed past a group of performers who were standing in a circle, singing. One male performer was chipping wax from a wooden table and two female performers in red dresses milled about the space washing bottles in worn, metal buckets. They worked in silent preparation for something; the singing provided a haunting backdrop for their action. A ritual was about to begin and we had been invited to witness. Audience members took their places on small wooden rafters reminiscent of the ones Grotowski used in Akropolis. We sat silently, enchanted by the beauty, darkness and solemnity of the scene.

Candles provided most of the lighting for the piece. Blackouts occurred after blowing out the candles and lighting resumed when, one by one and in ritualistic fashion, the candles were re-lit. Singing created the underscore for the entire fifty-five minute performance and was sometimes accompanied by delicately placed fiddling. There were moments of silence, which typically accompanied moments of darkness. These provided a needed time for reflection and exhalation. The performance centered around two protagonists: the women in red dresses, also referred to as Mary Magdalene and her sister, Martha, played by Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut.

I could describe the piece itself as a death ritual, a final act of mourning for Lazarus by his two sisters. But this would be a much too literal interpretation. In fact, *Gospels of Childhood* follows no particular story line. It feels like more of a haunting ceremony than a piece of theatre. It is a highly visual and highly aural performance consisting of tightly choreographed action that feels sacred and timeless in addition to being emotionally potent. The two women in red at times appear to be Mary and Martha, but at other times are simply two women replicating acts of childbirth, suffering, mourning, washing, and moving through pain. In fact, one of the structural, fundamental beliefs of Theatre ZAR is not to play a specific “character” on stage; the idea is to call or channel a character when needed.

“We are using or calling a character for awhile because the character is needed--it could bring to the piece the huge rainbow of meaning which is taken from the literature or cultural background. We can call this kind of character and shape it at any moment we want. In *Gospels*, there is Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, but they are really only those women in the moments they call themselves by name—but it’s not even necessary that you would follow that these two women are the characters of Mary and Martha. So the character can come and go at will. A character is like a track. And you can go on it—it can be stronger or more concrete, but maybe not. Maybe the track is like a highway or maybe it’s better to switch between tracks...as the actor, switching between the character and your personal approach or your life experiences.”

Therefore, in the works of Theatre ZAR, characters are used in the same way as songs, texts, small actions and relations with the space.

Much of what we see in *Gospels of Childhood* is abstract and carefully crafted using metaphor. At the climax of the performance, we see a mound of dirt under a large wooden table, possibly the fresh grave of Lazarus. A candle illuminates it in shadow. The candle is blown out and, in the dark, we hear sounds of shoveling the earth, which are followed by the voice of a woman keening in sorrow and loss. The audience has the sense that the funeral is coming to a close, the body is now in the earth and the family members are crying their final goodbyes. This leads into song, perhaps a final farewell, which then bleeds into the beginning of a rapid sequence in which Kamila Klamut and Ditte Berkeley open the large double doors of the lodge and allow the cold air to rush over the audience. The air is changing. The end is near. These are the final moments of *Gospels of Childhood*. The piece moves fluidly like this from sequence to sequence, using sound and silence as a means of transition. Klamut and Berkeley gently lay several white cloths on the wooden floor of the playing space and slowly light candles attached to several spoked, wooden wheels (made to resemble chandeliers) that are suspended from the ceiling at various heights. Jaroslaw Fret's voice becomes somehow clear and recognizable during this final song (yes, he is also a performer in the piece). Once the song has ended, there is a brief stillness before the actors briskly run off the stage and out the open doors. The audience sits in silence listening to the lovely sound of the chandeliers swinging on their taught ropes. It is up to the individual audience member when the piece ends. They could choose to sit for another hour, but most sit in meditative contemplation for a few minutes and then slowly exit the space. Some clap out of discomfort and confusion at such an atypical ending for an evening at the theatre. But most pay their respects and quietly make their way back to a fresh cup of hot tea.

I came to further understand the deeply personal nature of *Gospels of Childhood* and the work of Theatre ZAR when Fret later told me that his grandfather was once a funeral singer in Poland. The final song sung in *Gospels of Childhood*, the one where Fret's voice rings so clearly, is a kind of Polish ZAR that his grandfather used to sing during the closing of the coffin at funerals. It is sung as a last farewell and is sweet and light in melody. Fret says that it is about angels and the procession of angels welcoming the soul into heaven. "But it is painful at the same moment...it is the fusion of a sweet melody and a clear message: that this journey is something definite." Fret brought this song to the piece as a last fragment because it is so personal to him. He describes the most important acoustic experience of his life as being when, as a seventeen-year-old boy, he attended his grandfather's funeral. "This Polish song, which is now in *Gospels of Childhood*, was sung and I couldn't find my grandfather's voice among the other voices. This emptiness, this silence of his voice deeply affected me. How is it possible to have this deepest sound related experience but with silence, emptiness...nothing?" Fret says that the nature of his work with Teatre ZAR is the search for how to use theatre in today's world to connect with today's audience. He believes the purpose of theatre is, "to fill this void or emptiness and share not only the pain with others—because pain is only evidence that we live—but also the feelings and experiences of living and what it means to be alive."

*Caesarean Section* is Theatre ZAR's most recent creation. It premiered during the "Openings\*Winter" festival. Unlike *Gospels of Childhood*, *Caesarean Section* is a bit more of a theatre performance with an apparent beginning, middle and end. Choral singing, tight choreography, abstraction and use of metaphor play key elements in this work but *Caesarean Section* also contains difficult feats of physical strength and endurance, live instrumental playing and highly developed visual motifs revolving around a central metaphor: a crack filled with broken glass that runs the horizontal length of the stage. This crack serves as the spine or main artery of the performance. Although it will not be apparent to an audience member upon seeing the piece, Fret explains that *Caesarean Section* is about a piece of glass that is present in our veins, but not yet in our heart. *Caesarean Section* tracks the journey of this piece of glass from the moment we feel its presence in our bloodstream to the moment it reaches our heart. He says this glass is a metaphor for one's thoughts about suicide and, thus, one's thoughts about the limits of freedom.

"This notion of freedom is the main human question—not only artistic freedom but real freedom and the limits of your life...where are the borders of your freedom and when can you decide about your life—the end of your life—because you couldn't decide about the beginning. We are just arrive here. It's very simple. I don't know why I somehow separate a little piece of my mind from life. This part of my mind could cut my body. This part of my mind could decide about my life, or the end of my life. So how do I keep it awake and try not to cover or hide it? Because, generally, we ignore it...we are afraid of it. But I believe we need to keep this piece of ourselves alive and awake."

Theatre ZAR built the structure for *Caesarean Section* over the span of one year. The movement and visual metaphor for *Caesarean Section* was created independently from the songs (this is a much different process than that of *Gospels of Childhood*). This method of creation involved many improvisations based on different themes. Fret then had to face the problem of how to tighten the material, make it visible and integrate it with the music. He sometimes relied on silence, the sounds of the physical action on stage or sounds from simple objects, such as a metronome, to construct the sonosphere of the piece and initiate a kind of aural provocation to the audience. . "I want to try to convince our guests and spectators that theatre is more to be listened to than to be seen. I do not think people are conscious enough about how much what they see depends on what they hear at every single moment."

The premiere of *Caesarean Section* took place in the intimate, performance and rehearsal space of the former Laboratory Theatre, located on the top floor of the Grotowski Institute building in the Old Market Square of Wrocław. The action of the piece happened in the center of the playing space while the audience (some fifty or sixty people) sat on two-tiered risers on either side. Seven actors sat motionless in chairs dispersed throughout the stage area, four of them were behind musical instruments. The audience looked on the serenity of this picture as the dim stage lights cast marvelous shadows. The opening sequence of the performance was perhaps the most powerful. During the blackout, our ears filled with the sounds of the smashing of glass followed by

bellowing accordion music. When the lights came up, Ditte Berkeley stood straddling the glass spine. Glass shards were thrown at her feet and she proceeded to shock the audience by doing a highly stylized series of movements evoking the notions of dangerous steps and being held back by pain. Moving forward through these obstacles would be bloody and treacherous. She wore her shoes on her hands. She jerked and convulsed, bravely swept her feet along the glass shards, contorted, stepped in the glass, and turned and fell to the ground with the shoes breaking her fall. Eventually she put the shoes on her feet and walked away from the predicament. She sat down at one of the tables with Kamila Klamut already there waiting for her. Stage light only illuminated the table; their bodies were in shadow. The two women sat across from each other attempting to touch hands, reaching, striving for contact and receiving only a handful of air...just missing each other. The rest of the cast underscored this sequence by breathing audibly and deeply in unison. Meanwhile, Matej Matejka swept the glass shards into the large crack of broken glass. If one were to close their eyes during this sequence to simply listen, they would hear a symphony of sound. In a blackout, the breathing of the cast increased in speed and volume and transitioned into a haunting choral song accompanied by cello and violin; the river of glass became slowly illuminated by overhead lighting. This opening sequence served as a provocative introduction to the theatrical event; every audience member was leaning forward in anticipation of what was to come.

What followed over the next hour was a cruel and beautiful meditation on pain, death, absence of love and suicide. There is no text in *Caesarean Section*, only the entrancing singing by the members of Theatre ZAR. These songs provide the pulse of life for the piece and speak the multi dimensional subtext better than any words could. There is one half-hearted attempt to use text by Matej Matejka. This serves to break the well-established dramaturgic convention and seems almost cheap and disappointing. It is the only trite, predictable moment of the piece.

The performance itself is highly visual, aural and episodic. It is dimly and simply lit. The songs move us from image to image, interaction to interaction. But it is the line of broken glass that cuts through the center of the stage that serves as the main visual metaphor for this meditation. Most of what we see is a destructive triangle between Ditte Berkeley, Kamila Klamut and Matej Matejka. Perhaps it is a love triangle or a spiritual triangle—or both. The three performers constantly straddle this glass spine, coming dangerously close to the edge. There are duets and trios of convulsing movement and writhing in pain mixed with ecstasy. There is stamping in folkdance fashion, shoes being thrown on the wooden floor, glasses of red wine spilling their contents, bodies falling hard and fast on the ground. There are also many moments of silence and tenderness. The momentum of the piece is quick, which makes these times of decompression all the more exhilarating and well earned. Singing is the heart of the performance, and when these performers sing, they do it with their whole bodies. It is as if you can see the waves of sound rise from them, curl around their torsos and then disperse into the ether. Arms and hands move in circles almost as if they are tending to the sound waves, kneading them. The final image of the piece is the same one we see in the beginning; the illuminated glass river. Again, the audience sits in silence for some time. A few people

clap, most don't. There is no curtain call. Theatre ZAR just leaves time and space for thought and reflection.

*Gospels of Childhood* and *Caesarean Section* are the first two parts of a triptych Fret hopes to have completed for the Grotowski Institute's *Grotowski Year 2009* celebration in honor of the tenth anniversary of Grotowski's death, the fiftieth anniversary of the taking over of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole and the twenty fifth anniversary of the self-dissolution of the Laboratory Theatre. *Grotowski Year 2009* will involve a series of programs including exhibitions, conferences, seminars and a festival showcasing the works of Eugenio Barba, Pina Bausch, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Włodzimierz Staniewski, Tadashi Suzuki and Anatoly Vasiliev. The third part of Theatre ZAR's triptych will be *Anhelli* written by the Polish romantic poet, Juliusz Slowacki, in 1836. Matej Matejka will play the title role of *Anhelli*. Fret has an interest in Slowacki in part because Slowacki was also a very important writer for Grotowski (Grotowski staged his *Coridian* and Calderon De La Barca's *Constant Prince*, also staged by Grotowski, was an adaptation of a poem by Slowacki). It is Fret's hope that *Gospels of Childhood*, *Caesarean Section* and *Anhelli* will play back to back in one evening with the audience either moving to and from various venues or witnessing all three performances in one space.

Jaroslav Fret firmly believes in the possibility of creating theatrical transmission through sound while crafting a highly developed sonosphere for each work Theatre ZAR develops.

"The music, our work, helps us to understand the incredible reach of the sonospheric aspects of the world--sounds have a very deep, unconscious effect on us. They can teach us, heal us and even rescue us. Jesus was resurrecting Lazarus by weeping for him, crying, calling him. He created a sonospheric channel between himself and Lazarus. So the channel between life and death is a sonospheric channel. It is a metaphor. Theatre is the practical side of what I'm talking about. We strive to create a precise, unique structure that can conjure a concrete place and time, but it's a structure that is no different in terms of energy and approach than life itself. It's different just because we create a unique agreement between people who we invite, 'We have 55 minutes and we will spend it in this way.' But what we as a company are doing is presenting condensed life."

In the heart of Theatre ZAR is a passion for the preservation of the past while keeping their eyes firmly fixed on the future. The work of the company is truly a celebration of life through the examination of death.