

THEATER

Poland's ancient art comes to life

By Chad Jones
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

For a company that takes its name from ancient funeral songs, Poland's Teatr Zar is awfully lively.

Under the auspices of the San Francisco International Arts Festival, Teatr Zar makes its Northern California debut today with an ambitious show comprising three plays in two Potrero Hill locations just a few blocks apart.

Zar's "The Gospels of Childhood Triptych" began to take form in 1999 when apprentices of the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, Poland, began taking annual research expeditions into the mountainous reaches of Georgia to collect centuries-old music.

One of those apprentices was Jaroslaw Fret, the founder of Teatr Zar and now the director of the Grotowski Institute. He remembers hearing the music of the Caucasus Mountains and rethinking the relationship between humans and art.

"These are some of the most ancient polyphonic songs in the world," Fret says on the phone from Wroclaw. "We were in some of the highest parts of Caucasus, a region with its own language and its own song tradition in the form of chanting. The *zar* or funeral song that we took as our name means 'bell' or the raw quality of a man singing a lamentation. This music is pre-Christian, 2,000 years old and still part of funeral ceremonies there today. We saw how music is placed between life and art as a composition, an artificial creation but never only entertainment

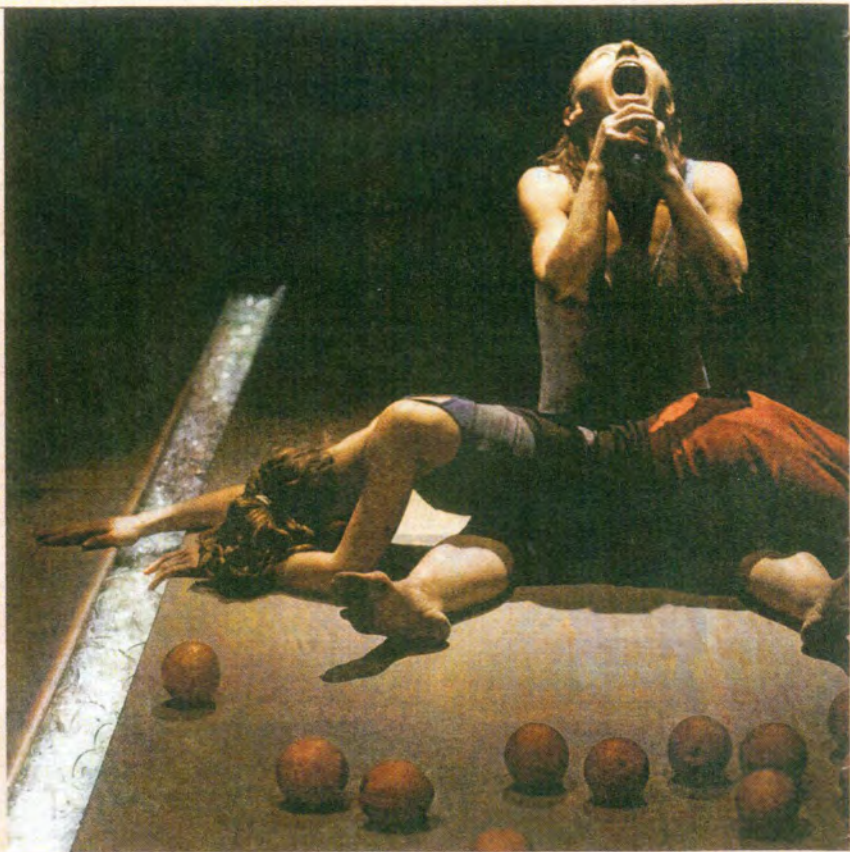
Teatr Zar's "The Gospels of Childhood Triptych": San Francisco International Arts Festival. Today-Wed. St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, 500 De Haro St., S.F. (Parts 1 and 3). Potrero Hill Neighborhood House, 953 De Haro St., S.F. (Part 2). \$20-\$25. (800) 838-3006. www.sfiarf.org.

or empty action."

For Fret, that intersection of art and life — or death, as the case may be — proved to be profound.

"What we wanted to do with this music is place it in a theatrical context to help us understand our destination, our life goals and aims," Fret says in heavily accented English. "We are limited by death because we can never see beyond that point. But inside the funeral chanting and lamentation, written inside the *zar* is the attempt to get closer to death, to see what is just beyond that barrier."

After many research trips, Fret and his ensemble created "Gospels of Childhood: Overture," which is now the first part of the triptych and will be performed in St. Gregory's



Lukasz Giza

Nini Julia Bang (praying) and Emma Claire Bonnici perform in Poland's Teatr Zar production of "The Gospels of Childhood Triptych."

Episcopal Church. Woven through the chanting is the story of Lazarus, his sisters and Mary Magdalene, who in the Gnostic tradition is considered one of the disciples.

The third piece, "Anhelli: The Calling," inspired by an 1838 poem by Juliusz Slowacki about exiled Poles in Siberia, is also performed in the church. The middle part, "Caesarian Section: Essays on Suicide," mixes up the musical palette to include Eric Satie and Astor Piazzolla and takes place at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House, about 2½ blocks up the hill from the church.

"The church is exactly the place we want to bring the first and last chapter of the triptych," Fret says. "Our work belongs to an ancient domain

of art, but it is contemporary — not modern or avant-garde. We represent something forgotten, which is art placed next to the spiritual dimension of human activity."

The middle section, Fret says, is more appropriate out of the church because it is not about our eternal destination as a question but more about the limits put on our freedom by the world, by religion, by ourselves.

Through it all, the music — both ancient and more contemporary — creates, in Fret's words, "a cathedral of sounds" that is its own unique form of theater, one that should only be experienced live.

"We work with songs the same way others work with ancient texts," Fret says. "This

music requires time to learn and to embody. We are changing the shape of our throats because of the technique, so the songs literally change us. The richness of the music couldn't possibly be captured in recordings — even digital recording is not good enough. You can record the melody and the progression of sounds, but you will not record the enormous fullness of orchestration coming from the throats, the vibrations of the voices coming together, hiding each other. The voices of the ensemble create many waves, not just one. Everything is sound. Very deep things are hidden in sounds."

E-mail Chad Jones at datebookletters@sfgchronicle.com.