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 ARTS+ENTERTAINMENT

**IN PERFORMANCE** 'The Gospels of Childhood Triptych' ★★★★★

# 'Triptych' intense ritual of life, death

Polish ensemble's wrenching theater not for fainthearted

By **CHRIS JONES**  
 Tribune critic

Some artists feel the thrill of the zeitgeist, the pull of the technological moment. Others, like the remarkable Teatr Zar of Poland, ignore these transitory urges in favor of the elemental. We all come from the earth, and we all end up as dust, an inevitable fate that this hyperfocused ensemble, visiting Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art this week, makes all too clear in its "The Gospels of Childhood Triptych," a wrenchingly intense three-hour, three-act performance that takes one traveling through the museum and from resurrection to death. Yes, in that order.

Actually, the modifier "three-act" is rather misleading for this piece, which resides far from conventional theatrical storytelling, is full of physical and emotional anguish of all kinds, is driven by ritual more than by meeting any perceived needs of an audience, and is not for the innocent or the fainthearted in all kinds of ways. Parts 1, 2 and 3 are not linked by any kind of causal narrative but mostly by music. This show is full of spectacular polyphonic harmonies (sung mostly a cappella but sometimes accompanied by such acoustic instruments as the cello and, quite remarkably, the saw), performed live and featuring the traditional music of such resonant locales as Georgia, Corsica, Bulgaria, Romania, Iceland and Chechnya.

The human soundscape of the piece is, simply put, spectacular (if you have an interest in the ancient music of Northern and Eastern Europe, you should not miss this rare chance). On occasion, one is inclined to close one's eyes and just let the voices wash over you.

But this show hardly is escapism from life's more wrenching



Members of Poland's Teatr Zar use ancient European music, mostly sung a cappella, as a soundscape for their meditation on life and death.

**When:** Through Sunday

**Where:** Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.

**Running time:** 3 hours

**Tickets:** \$28 at 312-397-4010 or [mcachicago.org](http://mcachicago.org)

dimensions. If you want a pocket summation, the best one I can offer is that this is a long meditation on the impulse to reach out for life, ecstatic at the gift thereof, as well as the twin impulse to snuff it out, taking one's

losses and quickening the inevitable. Bodies, highly trained in the kind of movement work most famously associated with Polish theorist Jerzy Grotowski, twitch and writhe, rise and fall, to a backdrop of sound that lands somewhere between what you might hear in a church and a primal cry of communal pain from the dispossessed.

I'd seen the brilliant Part 2 of this show before — Teatr Zar performed "Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide" to a small audience inside the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park in

2009, where its honesty and traumas formed a quite unforgettable contrast with the soaring Apollonian cityscape visible beyond. That passage is now performed inside the MCA gallery area (the first and third on the MCA Stage), a locale that does not pack quite the same metaphorical punch, but it's still intensely involving. With nothing more than a few simple props and chairs, this ensemble of a dozen or so actors and musicians build a landscape — and, by the way, they work here on top of shards of broken glass — where the stakes are so high that you

easily come to feel they are standing in for you at some moment of physical or existential crisis.

At the MCA, these essays on suicide (again, be warned) are set in the context of a piece pondering the possibility of resurrection and another, dominated by a huge piece of shroudlike canvas, where the characters seem to be trying to figure out the best way to die. All three are filled with the sounds of ecstasy and lamentation.

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