

Song from Beyond the Dark

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The project *Gospels of Childhood* carried out by Jarosław Fret together with Theatre ZAR is heading towards the end. Gradually the number of presentations is being limited, while the team is in an advanced stage of work on another performance and, as a matter of course, moves to quite another adventure. Despite the long, five-year period of realization and presentation in various versions, *Gospels of Childhood* has been discussed mostly in vague reviews and occasional remarks. Admittedly, in this desert, one exception did blossom in the form of Agnieszka Pietkiewicz's thesis, *Promieniowanie pamięci. Ewangelie Dzieciństwa Teatru ZAR* ['Radiation of Memory: Theatre ZAR's *Gospels of Childhood*'] written at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. But this valuable work is known to only a narrow circle of scholars and thus cannot be deemed to have influenced the performance's reception to any degree.

It may be said, therefore, that Polish theatre criticism has overlooked *Gospels* and disregarded an important phenomenon, which deserves more careful attention. It is an ambition of this text to fill the gap - at least partially. Alas this cannot substitute for the all the absent voices; to give one of the reasons, it is written from just one point of view, mine, bringing along every limitation a personal 'history' of encounters with *Gospels* imposes. In order to write about the project in full, and more in line with academic standards, one would need to go to great lengths of almost day-to-day

documentation: to take part in the work, expeditions, workshops and consecutive presentations. Otherwise we are condemned to partial solutions, such as this attempt - highly subjective and uncertain even as to the factual material.

I emphasize this uncertainty in order to reduce possible expectations of the reader, as well as to find and prepare for myself a comfortable position from which to talk about *Gospels*. Thus the first - and crucial - action I should take, but am unable to, is a comprehensive description of the project. This is a severe limitation, though quite often unrecognized and underestimated. Theatre ZAR situates itself among the ensembles acting in the field whose name has been perhaps most pertinently defined by Eugenio Barba: theatre-culture. Its actions do not fall under the division of 'artistic', 'preparatory' and 'administrative', just as its work does not divide into what is connected with the performance and 'other'. *Gospels of Childhood* is not just a title of the performance, it is also the name of a whole project, which comprises work sessions with a variety of artists, workshops conducted by the team members for apprentices and guests, and expeditions - including the most important: to Georgia (Svaneti), Greece (Mount Athos) and Iran (district of the community of the Mandeans). Within this large perspective, a work of art - a performance - does not have to be a main goal for its creators. Rather, it serves as a reason for the work, as a unifying force of many different actions, essential for directing and ordering

them, but not necessarily influencing the value of the experience. Even from a guest's perspective, one is able to obtain an impression that reaching Svaneti and the encounter with the tradition of funeral songs 'zar' was much more important an event than any acclaim or admiration after the performance. It is *zar* (and it is not an accident that the ensemble took this as its name) that is the most precious treasure and the jewel of the whole project, not only as an exceptionally powerful song but also as the fruit of a particular tradition and the intertwined cultural practices, and as a possible source for further transformations and development. Judging from Jarosław Fret's speeches, given on presenting documentation of the expeditions and work on the performance, one might gain an impression that for him the personal encounter with Svanetian culture has been an invaluable experience.

In contemporary performative arts we deal increasingly with a situation where a work of art, an artistic product, is one of many elements of a complex process or a complex project. This, naturally, has always been the case, but in the Western theatre tradition it has always been the performance that constituted a culmination point that governed material-collecting, training, rehearsals, etc. In the case of multi-stage and complex projects such as *Gospels*, creating such a hierarchy is pointless, and the performance should be treated as an integral part of a compound whole, which links artistic work with travel and anthropological and personal experience. Alas, apart from highlighting the fact that 'it should', and apart from a few simplistic remarks, I am unable to write much more about this phenomenon, since my contact with *Gospels* is, in fact, the contact of a spectator.

This first limitation does not, unfortunately, mark the end of the problems. At the first public presentation I saw (it took place as part of the celebrations of the anniversary of CTP 'Gardzienice', on 10 October 2002), a note 'work in progress' was added to the title of the performance. In fact it should be applied to

Gospels at all times, since it is a work that - like an increasing number of contemporary theatre pieces - changes constantly, thus making it impossible for us to determine a point from which to regard it as 'ready'. Such is, of course, the nature of any performative action: while remaining always a repetition, a re-enactment, it is at the same time a unique act, happening only now, in this particular way, in these given circumstances, between itself and each spectator or witness. In this sense a theatre piece or a performance does not exist - it happens. These observations, however basic, are often forgotten or blurred in everyday theatrical and critical practice. Theatres call for, and audiences accept, the existence of a generalized theatre work that serves as a kind of a universal model for each particular spectacle. However, not only does *Gospels* not hide the differences between particular versions, it even necessitates facing them and asking the fundamental question: what was the performance you saw like, given that you say you have seen it?

Here, it is necessary to refer to the personal experience: I have seen Fret's performance eight times, of which five took place in the 'forest site' of the Grotowski Institute, in Brzezinka, some forty kilometres from Wrocław. Therefore, it is my own account, which other spectators do not have to be familiar with at all. A good many of them, after all, have only seen *Gospels* played as a guest performance in quite different spaces; moreover, among those who have seen it in Wrocław, there will be many who know only the 'studio' version, presented at the site of the Institute located in the centre of Wrocław's Old Town. This means that 'my *Gospels*' may greatly differ from 'your *Gospels*', and in writing an account or in interpreting, one must emphasize this subjectivity, rather than imply that 'my' version is 'appropriate' and, therefore, 'better'.

Another aspect of the project's variability, and what provides an additional source of complication, is related to the ensemble's composition. The original group that started to work on the project *Gospels of Childhood* was

composed almost entirely of different people from today's ensemble. Changes - indeed substantial - occurred not only in the 'choir' but also among the protagonists. Among them, the most important is the change in the character of the man dressed in white garment (associated here with Lazarus), which took place in 2005. In the role formerly played by Dominik Kościelniak - somewhat angelic, boy-like, slender and fair - there appeared the stronger, more mature and resolute, dark-haired and even a little Mephistophelean Przemysław Błaszczak. The substitution seems particularly significant in respect of the monologue from *The Brothers Karamazov*, delivered by 'Lazarus' at the beginning of the performance: while Kościelniak was associated with Alosza, Błaszczak, in turn, appears more like Ivan.

When, to this maze of changes and differences, we add modifications in the composition and different ways of performing successive scenes, we receive a multifaceted, dynamic flow, which - contrary to the practice of the majority of theatre groups - presents itself as such, and even has no desire to be stopped. Thus, any interpretation, as well as any description will, patently and explicitly, form a writer's creation, his own version, added to all others, a new element of the constellation.

This does not mean, however, that *Gospels* is devoid of any consistent values that would provide a core for the variables to circle around. These constants are primarily the songs from Svaneti, the liturgical Orthodox hymns (such as *Kyrie Eleison* from the Sioni Church in Tbilisi) and the intertwined presence of the Choir that serves as a kind of support for the whole. To some extent the chronological composition of the performance's dramaturgy is also constant, as well as the arrangement and shape of particular scenes, which shall be described later. Some of the artists have not changed either: the leader of the Choir and director, Jarosław Fret, and the actresses performing the role of Mary/Martha - Ditte Berkeley (the only one who utters her lines in English through the performance) and

Kamila Klamut. All of these constants will serve as landmarks on my way through the labyrinth called *Gospels of Childhood*.

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Since 'my' *Gospels* is a Brzezinka performance, we need to begin with the journey and this basic fact: that in the case of watching the spectacle in Brzezinka, instead of going to a theatre located most often in the city, the audience has to decide to leave the town for more than three hours. It is, admittedly, organized and does not require any special logistical planning (as does, for instance, a trip to Gardzienice village), but nevertheless the event's character changes radically.

After an hour's drive, the coach calls into an exit off a forest road where a few people carrying flame torches are already waiting. The leader (usually Magda Mądra) informs the audience: 'We are in Brzezinka - the place where Jerzy Grotowski conducted his paratheatrical research in the '70s.' The information is important. For all of those who are familiar with the tradition of Grotowski, Brzezinka is like a legend, and *Gospels* does not move away from it. The very choice of the place, as well as emphasizing its past, implies treating the work that used to be conducted here as a tradition and as a partner in the dialogue between generations. It is a very important aspect, which needs to be highlighted before we start; often, after the performance, an opinion is expressed that *Gospels* is imitative, because it uses the achievements of Grotowski and even quotes directly from his theatre work. This criticism is based on a misunderstanding resulting from automatically falling into schemes of thinking marked out by critical clichés. There are, indeed, strong links with the artistic achievements of the Laboratory Theatre's creator. However, they are evoked in the performance clearly as part of a tradition that needs a creative, artistic response in the name of those for whom Grotowski as a theatre artist is a legend but is not part of their own experience. In some way, *Gospels* may also be read as an expression of a naïve, perhaps, but strong,



• Ditte Berkeley in *Ewangelie dzieciństwa*.
Photo by Tom Dombrowski

childlike faith in the possibility of creating a theatre in which few still believe but for which many yearn: a theatre opening a perspective of verticality and transcendence. *Gospels* (referring in the very title to the Laboratory Theatre performance that provided a departure point for *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*) provides a basis for a multi-layered dialogue with tradition, a dialogue somewhat concealed yet distinctive.

This begins during the first seconds of the performance. When, after a few moments's waiting, the audience enters into a spacious room situated in the centre of the ground floor of the old farm house, they hear a song that is ending. The Choir disperses; its members begin to put out the candles and tidy the interior after something that has just been performed. An extraordinary beginning indeed - to come in, sit down to watch, only to realize it is over. Of course nobody expects to have come to Brzezinka in vain, but still, when the actors scrape wax off the table, hang white sheets out, blow out the rest of the candles and leave, one has a strong feeling of

being late for something. As seen in *Brzezinka*, this scene conveys the essence of the complicated situation that the generation after Grotowski faces; not being 'the sons' or the direct inheritors, devoid of the possibility of basing work on their own direct experience, they search within this tradition to find their own source. Naturally, the initial lateness refers as well to other types of legacy, including the religious. This scene finds its sources in an almost anecdotal event, which took place during one of the expeditions. In a church in Odessa the company chanced upon the very end of a ceremony and was only able to see its remains and hear its echoes. This epilogue of sorts is at the same time a prologue that provides a meaningful frame for the whole performance. Everything that happens later in the course of the performance occurs as if after, or instead. 'Those who came too late' strive to reach the experience to which they do not have access, yet of which they do have intimations, at all times struggling with despair.

Just before the initial sequence ends, the 'technical' actions, which involve ordinary cleaning of the space, take on a shape through which an icon seems to filter. A tall, slender girl folds a tablecloth covering the table. For a moment, she holds it in her extended arms, like a dead body or its shroud. A man lights the scene with a candle. After a second, with a blow, he also puts out this source of light.

It grows dark and silent, and remains thus for a moment, which seems long - as moments of silence in theatre do. At last, the first words sound, the first notes of a song reverberate through the space, and the first light appears. Standing in it, a Man (Błaszczak) speaks an abridged and musically rearranged monologue of Ivan Karamazov from Dostoyevsky's novel, which is a rebellious act of rejecting eternal glory, in respect of the intractability of human suffering. The words, uttered calmly at the beginning, become more and more enraged, culminating in a powerful point at the end, which sounds like an accusation: 'I want to be here when everyone suddenly discovers why it has all been the way it has. I want to see it for myself, and if by that time I am already dead, then let me be raised up again.'

With these words the lights go out, but after a moment's darkness, they flash once again. Subsequent sequences are constructed from short scenes that seem as if they are unfixed pictures called from the darkness by the light and the song. The protagonists of these pictures are three women. Two of them, dressed in simple red dresses, appear in the list of characters as Mary/Martha. The first, a slender fair-haired girl (Berkeley) will gradually come to resemble the gospel Martha, taking on her alleged energy and firmness. Her straight, sometimes even tense body creates an impression of something hard and expressively definite. The other character (Klamut) seems to have a limited power over herself. She is uncertain on the one hand, yet on the other rebellious. Her body fails her; one might even deem her sometimes as a little handicapped (in the initial scene of cleaning she

walks with a clear limp). In order not to establish fixed evangelic identities here, I shall refer to the former as 'The Bright', the latter as 'The Dark'.

The third woman (Aleksandra Kotecka) also wears a simple, dark-blue dress. She is a strong girl who stresses her distinctiveness from the very beginning. Her relation to the other characters is never made clear. She acts in between the events and the people - therefore, the name she had in the previous versions of the character list appears to be the most accurate, 'The Third One'.

The opening, oneiric sequences seem to be not personal memories so much as common ones. One of the very first is a scene depicting an agony, resembling a pieta: a young man dies in convulsion on a woman's lap. Then, there appears a sequence of images, evoking childhood memory. They are accompanied by the Choir's song *Romelni Kerubimtas* ('Thou, who lookest like a cherubin'), which is like a river current that carries them and - every now and then - for a moment brings them to the surface. Dynamically 'edited' images are embedded in a soft, almost contemplative song, which makes the audience feel distanced from those images, as we always are whenever we speak about our memories, even the most dramatic - being separated from them by time and our own knowledge of how it all ended. The song comes to an end, and the current of memories stops. In the reigning silence, the sisters, now as if frozen and desolate, try to warm each other. Eventually, they open the door to the large fireplace in the centre of the wall opposite the audience, letting in the warm light of the flames. The silence is broken by the sound of tubular bells, joined after a moment by the Choir's intonation of Psalm 103: *Praise the Lord, O my soul ...*

As the psalm sounds, in the centre of the space there appear sequences of women in labour. In the first one, The Bright is giving birth, supported by The Dark, who holds her and cools her head. After a while, The Bright springs up to join the Choir, as if cutting through the soft song with a high-pitched voice; her intervention gives

the song a new dynamic. The cohesive thanksgiving harmony is suddenly pierced by a scream from quite another space - the scream of a woman giving birth in pain. In the next moment her scream changes into words that are a fusion of the evangelic teachings of Jesus with one of the best-known verses from the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, 'Blessed be the womb that has not conceived, and the breast that has not given milk.'

Having uttered these words, The Bright hastens back to the 'stage', to hold up and support The Dark, who has taken over the role of the giving birth. However, after a moment The Dark is left alone. The Bright walks back to the Choir to repeat the words, this time pronouncing them more powerfully and full of determination. The Choir stirs; The Bright's intervention has disrupted the thanksgiving harmony. The psalm suspends at the vowel 'a', now prolonged, and joined by the voices - higher than all the others - of The Bright and The Third One. The sound grows increasingly louder until, reaching a climax, it changes into the word *anthropos* - 'human'. At this moment The Dark's labour is over. From the sound and the flesh, a word is born, and The Man is the one to preach it.

Half-naked, and filled with some extraordinary lightness, he delivers another famous logion from the *Gospel of Thomas*: 'Blessed is the one who stays at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death.' He pronounces these words without exaggerated solemnity but more like a platitude, and even surprisingly he speaks them with a laugh - somewhat Mephistophelean and filled with mockery. This laugh soon changes into a commanding yell, 'the Door!' The subsequent commands are broken by his laughter and knocking on the table, which gradually increases in loudness, becoming a musical, rhythmical element. It is accompanied by a high-pitched sound of tubular bells, and after a while the Georgian *Amin* sounds. Once again the loudness of the song increases, as if in order to drown out the sound of knocking. Once again, another new voice pierces the song; the

sharp tone given by The Bright changes into words, which constitute a modified and musically-arranged quotation from the First Epistle to the Corinthians (15: 38-42). As a response, a monologue begins, uttered by The Man, who begins with the yell, 'The Door! The Door!', which evolves into something that resembles a sermon on resurrection. He delivers it in candlelight, which sculpts his half-naked body, making him resemble the prophet from the painting by Caravaggio. He speaks quickly, and the meaning reaches the audience's ears only with difficulty. What remains is an impression of the racing thoughts of a person struggling to grasp an incomprehensible truth.

This prophecy or sermon is accompanied by three songs: first, a calm Svan version of the Trisagion hymn *Cmidao ghmerto*, then a more dynamic *Kyrie Eleison* from Mount Athos and finally, accompanying the last words of the sermon, a Georgian song about Christ's Resurrection. Both the very selection of the songs as well as their 'editing' enhance the sermon's power and provide it with meanings deriving from the liturgy (Trisagion, in Orthodox churches, is sung before the reading of the Gospel), as well as from the prayer and from Christ's Rising. However, these three contexts do not occur as fixed or stable but rather function as additional motives to the central theme, carried out by the speaker.

As The Man delivers his lesson, The Bright repeatedly tries to separate from the Choir and walk to him but is held back by The Dark. The last sentence of the sermon, 'It is necessary to rise in this flesh, since everything exists in it', is shouted three times, and the repetitions are entwined with the hymn on the Resurrection of Christ, which then evolves into the Svan song *Dzgiragi*. It has an extraordinary structure based on an abbreviated verse that sounds like the shallow, panting breath of a dying person. The Choir moves close to The Man, lighting their candles from his, and take him in. On 'the stage', holding each other, remain The Bright and The Dark. Embracing tightly, they speak the dialogue



• *Ewangelie dzieciństwa*,
Przemysław Błaszczak.
Photo by Tom Dombrowski

between Mary and 'her double', equated with death - taken from the gnostic *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. For a moment, they form a unity, and in their union they are illuminated by something that seizes and embraces them, by something to which they both belong and which both serve when they are separated - in different, though mutually complementary ways.

Through the silence that falls after both the dialogue and the song ends, there reverberates the sound of a small bell, which resembles the one that can be heard before the Elevation during a Catholic Mass. The Bright unbuttons The Dark's dress, thus beginning a sequence of preparing to leave. The sisters take their dresses off, wash their feet in a bowl of water, and put their dresses back on; they also cover their heads with black scarves. The Bright acts in a quick and determined manner, whereas The Dark is drowsy and somewhat absent.

This whole sequence, diverging from other parts of the performance in both dynamics and aesthetics, is a quotation - and one that is used very consciously. It is a re-staging of probably the only ever recorded rehearsal of the Laboratory Theatre's *Gospels*. This particular sequence

comes from the film made for French television by Jean-Marie Drot, although it is more widely known from Janusz Domagalik's 1980 film documentary *Pełen guślarstwa obrzęd świątokradzki* ['Full of Sorcery Sacrilegious Rite']. It is, therefore, the only sequence related to *Gospels* - and the performance which later emerged from it, *Apocalypse cum Figuris* - that can possibly be known to the generation which 'came too late'. It is noteworthy that in this moment, and in the following reprise of this sequence, the Marys from *Gospels of Childhood* will never reach the Sepulchre and lift the shrouds left inside, as occurred in the filmed rehearsal and (in a slightly changed form) in *Apocalypse*. After a long while of preparation, the two sisters stand next to each other, ready to go. They start walking, but soon The Dark runs back to collect the flask she has forgotten. One clumsy movement and the oil flask falls to the ground and smashes. The Dark, somewhat piqued at this, exclaims, 'I'm not going!'

At these words, the Choir walks to the door. A Polish dawn song is sung - a little noisily, to a coarse accompaniment of a trumpet and an accordion. The Choir stops by the open door,

through which the forest, enveloped in the night's darkness, can be seen. Meanwhile, The Bright stands by the other door, gazing at the centre of the space, where The Dark nestles in the arms of The Man, whose white shirt is now roughly unbuttoned.

This whole scene is pervaded by the atmosphere of Polish folk piety, which blends together the high with the low, the solemn with the crude. As Fret mentioned, it is connected with his personal memories from folk weddings, which usually ended with the band and the drunken wedding guests walking out of the house to sing the dawn song. However, here, this band, into which the Choir has transformed, resembles an amateur parish orchestra, which often accompanies the traditional Resurrection processions on the Easter Sunday. In a sense, this dawn song talks about waking up from a dream, which is a shadow of death. It is, therefore, not accidental that in the performance it breaks off on the verse, 'We still wake up ...'.

This ending is closely related to the action taking place on the stage. The initially gentle caresses and hugs of The Dark and The Man grow evermore violent. The Man's mounting aggression leads him to attempt a rape. She tries to break free; he is stronger, however, and finally tears off her dress. She falls to the floor. At this moment the song breaks off, and the members of the Choir turn back to look. The Bright runs to her sister and tries to help her up. She lifts her on her back, but The Dark falls down inertly like a sack. After another attempt, The Bright throws accusations at her sister, which are a slightly changed version of the complaint in the Gospel Martha (Luke 10: 40), 'You don't care about anything, you have left me here to serve on my own.' Being unable to lift her sister, she seats her by the wall. The Choir, playing at a quick tempo a fragment of the dawn song, moves a step towards the centre of the space. The door is closed. After a short while the song *Szen qiga lobt* begins - a Georgian call for the prayer.

The Dark stands up and, leaning against the wall, faces the Choir. With a voice filled with

anger and pride, she speaks a monologue which, in a way, reveals her true identity as the powerful, eternal female force. The last words ('I am the one you have been looking for') are shouted out twice. The song then breaks off, to be substituted by the sound of the accordion, and subsequently, by an almost lyrical song of the Choir and the high, prominent voice of The Bright, growing ever louder. The Man drags The Third One to the centre and sets her into a spinning movement, whose rhythm is governed by the sound of the stones falling on the wooden floor of the stage. Each thump is a blow landing on The Dark, who stands against the wall. Her body is stoned with the sound, wounded with it, until it is dead. The Dark, while remaining Mary the sister of Martha, and Mary Magdalene, becomes also the harlot - stoned to death, because no Innocent stood by her.

As The Dark falls under the blows, The Third One falls down as well, and her body is covered with a shroud. After a moment's silence, The Bright quickly closes the iron door of the fireplace and opens the door in the wall to the audience's right. Rays of candlelight burst through, as well as the thumping of a hammer, like the sound of a nail being driven into a coffin or a cross, the sound of death. As if in response to it, the Leader of the Choir starts a song from the Catholic funeral liturgy, a prayer that is sung at the cemetery moments before lowering the coffin to the tomb. The solo intonation, set against the indifferent background, is immensely powerful, as it refers to the most traumatic personal experience. The clash of the solemn prayer with the technical, professionally cold service is like putting a finger back into the wound we have long thought to be healed.

When the song ceases and the doors close, The Bright lights a candle and puts it next to the place where her sister lies. Meanwhile, The Third One stands up, walks to the table and - with one slow movement - throws all the objects lying on it to the floor. The Bright pours water into a bowl and washes her hands. After a while, The Dark rises, walks to her, and washes her face, hands

and shoulders. The Third One covers a part of the table with a clean tablecloth. The sisters prepare, once again, to go. The Dark puts on the dress The Man tore off; The Bright, acting briskly and decidedly as ever, helps her. The Third One puts bread on the white tablecloth and pours wine into a glass. All three put on their black headscarves. They are ready.

But the expected supper does not take place. The Third One tears the loaf in two and puts the halves back on the table, then spills the wine on it. The Bright runs to the table in anxiety, but The Third One stops her and lays her head on the table by force, in a puddle of wine. The Choir, standing now almost in the centre of the stage, gives a single, wordless tone that lasts for a long time and underscores The Bright's words - taken from Simone Weil. This famous fragment, used also in *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, focuses on a teacher who did not teach anything to the one who awaited him, and who had come to her by mistake. However, its ending differs here from the original version. As The Bright reaches the words, 'Sometimes I cannot refrain from recalling to myself, with fear and guilt, fragments of what he had told me', she is disturbed by The Dark, who says, 'Don't touch me. He said, don't touch me'. This intervention (the only time anything is uttered by The Dark in English) obviously refers to the evangelical 'Noli me tangere' (John 20: 17), thus confirming the equation of Mary, the sister of Martha, with Mary Magdalene.

The Choir's song evolves into *Kyrie Eleison* from the Sioni church, which is one of the two musical pillars of the performance. The three women sit at the table, on which the torn bread lies. The Bright takes *The Bible* from The Dark's hands, opens it, and with a breaking voice reads in English the fragment of the 'Gospel of St John' about the illness and death of Lazarus. When she reaches the words 'Mary and her sister Martha', The Dark interrupts, shouting 'Mary!', 'Martha!' The Bright insists, but The Dark does not give up: 'Mary!', she shouts again and takes over the reading in Polish: 'It was Mary who anointed the

Lord with ointment', she says, transforming in a way Martha and Mary into two Marys, one of whom is Mary Magdalene, the harlot. After this, The Bright intercepts the reading once again and continues until the sorrowful Martha's statement, 'Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died.' At this moment a significant divergence from the Gospel account occurs. The words that should follow, an expression of Martha's confidence in Jesus' power, are not uttered, and the summoning of her sister only enables Mary to shout her grudge out as well. Thus, she repeats ever louder, 'If thou hadst been here.' The words evolve into a lamentation, and from it, into an incomprehensible plaintive wail that is bound with the song, creating a great polyphonic expression of resentment. It builds to reach a very high chord and then breaks off.

Silence and darkness fall. And through this darkness, *zar* - a Svan funeral song - reverberates. As Jarosław Fret says, it is a song like a column of spirits, like a stairway the soul ascends. In the performance it sounds like a response to the lamentation *Kyrie*; the two songs appear in this moment like two persons made of flesh. They are neither signs nor symbols. What is crucial is their tangible presence, beyond the reach of words, beyond images, beyond meanings. For *zar*, together with the accompanying female lamentations and cries, are heard in the *Gospels* in complete darkness. There is no image here to be seen - we are surrounded by the song, which is an absolute fact, which we are to live here and now. *Zar*, in my deepest and repeatedly confirmed experience, is an act of encountering death and overcoming it within the song, which, ultimately, not only fills the darkness but also illuminates it, although the vision is obscured.

While *zar* evolves, in the darkness, a clatter and the sound of a spade digging repeatedly in the ground can be heard. In the end, a low tone of a tubular bell sounds. The Leader of the Choir intones the initial verses of *Megistis Pascha* - a paschal song from Mount Athos. From the Choir,

and still in total darkness, The Man's voice emerges, speaking the initial part of the gnostic *Hymn of the Pearl*. This time, he speaks calmly, as if revealing a truth that constitutes the very core of his knowledge. But he speaks only about the quest, about the letter his parents gave him in order to remind him of his mission. There are no words that speak about the fall and the return - there is only the imperative to strive.

Slowly, the light is brought back. The Choir leads an Easter liturgy of Resurrection, which is accompanied by the sounds of tubular bells. The Bright and The Dark lower steel cart-wheels from below the ceiling and, one after another, light thin Orthodox candles. The sound and the light announce: *Christos anesti* (Christ is Risen). This is certified by the images: an excavated tomb and shrouds lain on the floor by the women. In the finale, the sound mounts once again until it reaches a climax; the last sound is a single chime of the biggest bell. Before it dies away, all the actors leave. Left alone in the illuminated and suddenly quiet space, is the audience; usually staying long in the silence, sometimes somewhat anxious for a continuation of some kind, very rarely breaking impatiently into conventional clapping, but against convention, nobody comes back to thank the audience for it and bow.

3

On completing this unavoidably linear report, I am overwhelmed by a feeling of having oversimplified the experience of *Gospels of Childhood*. What does vindicate me to some extent, however, is that this loss was inevitable, because of the differences between the multi-channelled and multi-directional, spatial, sensuous and spiritual experience and the verbal and intellectual task, which writing about any performance has to be. It is precisely this difference of dimensions that creates a fundamental problem. In writing about a traditional dramatic theatre, a writer may count on an important support, namely, the linearity that results from theatre's strong connections with literature. A theatre that respects writing,

also lends itself to writing. The problem arose when theatres started to appear that did not base their work on script and the stress was shifted from permanent and timeless (a record) to specific and contemporary (a performance). Artists began to seek new dramatic means, instead of using a text to be pronounced, they intended to create a kind of environment of experience built not of signs but of those means that impact on the extra-intellectual, sensory organs of perception. The most important of those means is music - traditionally contrasted with the word as one that permits a direct perception of the inexpressible.

A detailed elaboration of the differences between a theatre that is born from the word and the theatre 'from the spirit of music' needs to be put off for another occasion. I mention it here, from necessity cursorily and superficially, because ZAR is a theatre 'from the spirit of music', being one of the most prominent ensembles in Poland that develop in their own way the idea of the theatre of musicality, which finds its source in the experiences of 'Gardzienice'. *Gospels of Childhood* is a work in which the music, or more generally the sound and its dramaturgy, plays a crucial role. It is composed on music principles and could certainly be analysed with the use of music terminology.

Still, this does not mean that it is an exclusively musical opus. In addition to the songs, there are also words and actions referring to the Gospel scenes - therefore carrying a lot of cultural symbolism - as well as sequences functioning as personal metaphors, which are ambiguous, triggering equally personal associations. Yet all of them are intertwined in a composition that works more like a musical piece than a literary one, for it produces a specific overall reaction, which lies very far from 'comprehending' and, thus, is extremely difficult to verbalize. This difficulty is also connected with the discontinuity that characterizes this work and provides its uniqueness. Variability of rhythms, sudden shifts from calm and soft

scenes to dynamic ones, lengthy spaces granted for silence and darkness, a relatively extensive geography of acting areas, a variety and variability of means of expression - all of this creates an impression of dispersal and discontinuity, which fades only towards the end of the performance, together with the appearance of the sequence of scenes that refers to the most renowned motif, derived from the canonical Gospels.

This discontinuity was intentional, as the creators gave the performance the subtitle 'Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'. While being a paraphrase of the title of the ode by William Wordsworth, the subtitle refers also to a famous Polish example, Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, whose title was originally intended to be *Fragments from the Poem Forefathers' Eve*.

This subtitle of *Gospels of Childhood* must be read as a suggestion for the audience not to search for ways to integrate or unify but rather to be open to encountering 'fragments' and 'intimations'. Both of these terms allude to a surface absence of what is most important. I referred to the fragmentary nature of *Forefathers' Eve* purposefully, because this masterpiece is probably the greatest example in Polish literature of an open and unfinished opus, which at the same time is a challenge and an indication of a powerful yet undisclosed force, of a core that exists, even though it seems to be empty - in other words, of a mystery. As Krzysztof Rutkowski used to say, one cannot speak the mystery out; one can only aspire to corner it. This aspiration - of not expressing directly - cannot have the structure of a linear and complete dissertation, for as such, it could only succeed in talking the mystery away. It has to be discontinuous, fragmentary, based on intimations. It aims not at signifying and communicating but at building a space for possible experience, creating opportunities, leading to ambiguities.

Such is the nature of the Theatre ZAR performance, which is not only site-specific, but

also time- and sound-specific. Referring to it with the word 'performance' is only partly justified, for *Gospels* is more a sound-spatial environment, in which the events that take place are complemented by the spectator's experience. This complementary addition is, in a way, the mystery's polar opposite of discontinuity and fragmentariness. The inexpressible silence, which is the project's core, correlates with the silence scattered on the peripheries. Between them, the effect of the sounds, bodies and words is located, which, therefore, cannot be anything other than fragmentary, incomplete and discontinuous.

To respond to the character of the piece as described, and intending also - at least partially - to delimit the advantage of linearity, I would like to lend voice to the experience itself, in all its extensiveness, and to recall, to evoke my experience of *Gospels* as a certain remembered whole. What dominates is the music - above all, *zar* and the final Orthodox Greek hymns. That they 'dominate' means here simply that when I think of Fret's performance, the first thing to appear is the darkness and *zar* reverberating through it, and then the light of the paschal hymn and the lit candles swinging on the metal wheels. That they 'dominate' means also that for me *Gospels*, like the ethno-oratorios of 'Gardzienice', is primarily an experience of musicality - an experience available more to a listener than to a spectator.

If I were to synthesize the effect this performance produces, the action it performed within my own experience, I would use the expression 'looming out'. I see *Gospels* as a bright seed, looming out from tangled, hazy and unclear fragments. Their dramaturgy is not a dramaturgy of journeying to reach something but one of looming out, lightening, uncovering, and - eventually - being born. From the scattered initial scenes, from the variety of their themes, a main line gradually appears, which is detectable in the darkness, and in the light of the concluding scenes. This line leads to the core of the spectacle, namely, to the death and



• *Ewangelie dzieciństwa*,
Przemysław Błaszczak and
Kamila Klamut.
Photo by Tom Dombrowski

resurrection of Lazarus, which is the situation I shall remember most distinctly. *Gospels* for me is an endeavour to cross the borderline of death, to open the door that slams shut after those who pass away. Maybe this is the reason why, out of many details I am able to recall, the one that is engraved in my memory particularly firmly is the cry, 'The Door!', woven surprisingly into the logia of the *Gospel of Thomas* - the cry that does not seem to belong to any character's line and at the same time sounds like a battle cry.

I also remember images, of course, and I was able to describe some of them. However, from the iconography of *Gospels*, what lodged itself most strongly in my memory is not so much any concrete image but the very repetitive situation: faces and bodies looming up from candlelight in the darkness, with the dynamic structure of light-shade oppositions that is present as well in the paintings by de la Tour and Caravaggio. This is connected in an astonishingly obvious manner with what I have said above about the dramaturgy of *Gospels*, namely, with the performance's basic figure of looming out.

The song and this looming out. The song that occurs in the darkness and in the light, and this that passes between the two, surfacing for a moment like a dolphin's head.

4

From among a wide range of different subjects raised by *Gospels*, I would like to point to the issues related to the dramaturgy of the performance and, consequently, to the dramaturgy of the experience of encountering it. I believe that this dramaturgy may be analysed by referring to the characters involved, together with the actions they perform and the 'model' structure that lies at their base.

The very type of existence of the *dramatis personæ* in *Gospels* is a peculiar one; it is contrary to the expectations of an audience raised on traditional dramatic theatre, accustomed to the uniformity and consequences of characters and believing in the axiom that the unity of the person with a body is tantamount to

the unity of identity. Conversely, in the performance of Fret - who refers creatively also in this respect to the achievements of Grotowski and Staniewski - the identity, the body and the voice of a performer are not equated with the identity, the body and the voice of the character, which he or she allows to emerge. The audience spontaneously seeks in the performance homogenous characters 'implanted' in the bodies of the actors, while, in my opinion, it would be far more appropriate to focus on each of the performing persons and observe their journey through various situations, actions and relations with one another.

Besides being more appropriate, it would also be easier, because if one searches for 'characters', *Gospels* lays false trails. To show this strategy, let us first look at the most active participants of the events, to whom I have earlier referred as The Bright and The Dark. It is worth remembering here that they, as the only 'characters' in the performance, have kept the name that was originally proposed by the creators. Their character is, therefore, still named Mary/Martha, and written in this way. That the character's name is recorded in this way, coupled with duality presented by the performers, creates an expectation that the identity of the character will be fluid but also points to its dual unity. However, during the performance we often encounter scenes that suggest that The Bright is Martha, whereas The Dark, Mary. Sequences in which they seem to change their roles do appear, naturally; however, these occur rarely and by no means do they belong to the main course of actions. Most of the time, the two persons act - and are perceived - as Mary and Martha, even evoking directly the roles of the sisters of Lazarus in the final scene. At the same time, however, to see them as representing these specific characters throughout the whole performance would oversimplify, if not distort, the sense of their stage presence, since what is by far more important than the obvious differences between them, is what they have in common. The key scene here is, of course, the 'dialogue' from

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene. In the performance's synopsis it is called *Hesychia*, which on the one hand may refer to the ascetic and meditative practice of the Christian Anchorites; on the other hand, however, it is the name of the Greek goddess of quiet and stillness, the daughter of Dice. The unity that the two women characters achieve in this scene comprises both of these aspects: their communion is like a spiritual elation, like attaining mystical knowledge; but at the same time it appears as an embodiment of the goddess - of a unity built from two. Adopting the traditional Christian interpretation of Mary/Martha as a representation of two paths leading to God - of action and of contemplation - we will see that their coalescence in the act (and the figure) of *Hesychia* will become an image of Completeness, arising from having rejected neither possibility. Rejecting neither possibility also means resigning from choosing, as opposed to actively choosing. Here lies the great difficulty of attaining fulfillment, which appears only momentarily in the performance.

The duality and opposition of The Bright and The Dark have yet quite another aspect, which also refers to evangelical examples. It is beyond doubt that by her actions The Dark gradually comes close to those traditional interpretations that equate Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene. This process is clearly in evidence and made manifest through many signs. However, a question arises here, whether - in respect of such an evaluation of The Dark - we are able to track a similar change in the Bright; whether - to express this more precisely - in view of the transition of The Dark towards Mary Magdalene, some other pattern emerges connected with The Bright. I believe that the gradual emergence of Mary Magdalene out of Mary of Bethany helps us discern that in Martha another Mary is present, namely, the mother of Jesus. This process is of course not in the least as spectacular as The Dark's transition, yet placing the two characters within such a perspective allows us to understand better some aspects of

The Bright's actions - the initial 'Pieta' with the tablecloth/shroud, or the fact that it is she who is later to 'teach' of, among other things, the Immaculate Conception. It is also worth remembering here that in the Christian tradition both Marys function as oppositions that gradually - and owing to the repentance of Mary Magdalene - approach one another, eventually attaining unity in their love for Jesus.

This does not mean, of course, that The Bright 'plays' Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The point is that in the case of these characters, there is no permanent 'entering into roles'. Neither The Bright nor The Dark loses her identity, described probably most accurately by Richard Schechner's formula 'not-not-me'. They are not actresses acting in their own name, but neither do they become any of the evoked characters. Through a crack in identities, which traditional theatre struggles to avoid, these characters emerge into the space, in which they can exist simultaneously in various aspects and dimensions, and point to the indissoluble unity they form. Perhaps the *modus operandi* of this process is most visible in the scene of reading the Gospel. Doubtlessly, the women who read are not the ones they read about, but at the same time - and this simultaneity needs to be emphasized - they are. Their lamentation is the lament of Mary and Martha at the grave of Lazarus and - simultaneously - the lament of Mary and Mary Magdalene over the dying Jesus ('if thou hadst been here' sounds like Jesus' own cry at that later event, 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'), as well as the lamentation of all mourners reverberating through the centuries. It is being sung from the crack between the characters.

Quite similar in nature are the two remaining characters I have singled out, who share the feature of losing their proper names in the course of the performance. Thus the female character that appears in the performance beside The Bright and The Dark used to bear the name The Third One, which I have taken the liberty of retaining. The Third One serves as a counterpoint to Mary/Martha. Even when she takes part in

their actions, she is perceived as different. During many stage actions she alone situates herself at the opposite pole to the sisters, opposing, but at the same time, complementing them. Moreover, although all three move dynamically between different roles and registers, The Third One has much greater latitude, functioning like a trickster who can easily change shape and identity, yet who often also thwarts and counteracts the actions of The Bright and The Dark that aim at attaining something clear and permanent. The Third One, juxtaposed with The Two, is a mysterious element, a shadow and a distortion of their unity, something driven out, yet essential. Her silent presence (silent in the sense that she does not utter a single word) introduces a peculiar dynamic to the relations between characters, distorting the rising connection and equilibrium between The Bright and The Dark and at the same time in a sense opening the way for another person - The Man.

I regard The Man as an axis, around which the other characters' actions happen. Moreover, he functions as a figure that, in a sense, induces these actions. Adopting the original name of this character and assuming that The Man is Lazarus, it seems beyond doubt that the actions of Mary/Martha should be concentrated around him, while the central events - the death, the funeral and the complaint directed at the Absent - refer to him. Yet such clear-cut assigning of the character is in direct opposition to the words uttered by The Man - in relation not only to their meaning but also to their nature and place in the dramaturgy of the performance. The first monologue is, after all, a fierce accusation of God and a rejection of his order. The second monologue, the 'sermon on resurrection', is in turn a speech of a teacher and a prophet. And the third and final monologue has an air of revelation and, also, of some resignation. In addition, between those monologues delivered by The Man, his various actions take place, including the rape of The Dark and his participation in stoning her to death. All these actions and speeches seem inconsistent,

although functionally they do concur in each individual situation. Perhaps The Man, therefore, is not an axis but rather a beam of various voices that speak depending on a given situation, something more of the trickster nature of The Third One; perhaps 'The Fourth One'?

That is a tempting speculation, yet it does not accord with the character's function in the realm of the performance. The Man, after all, occupies a very important place, to which the roles taken on by the other characters allude through their words and actions. It is the place of Jesus, although occupied by somebody who does not assume the role of the Absent, yet whose presence emphasizes the Absence still more strongly. The Man, even when acting as a prophet, is a person who does not act instead of, but rather during Jesus' non-presence. His four actions correspond with the four models of reaction to the Absence: rebellion, theological speculation, cruelty and striving. Among them, the least Christ-like is the action related to the stoning, where The Man brings death into the situation into which Jesus brought rescue. For this is probably the ultimate sense of the presence of The Man in the place where Christ should be - crucial for this presence is the resurrection, or, more specifically, its lack. The Man is Lazarus in the sense that he dies and cannot rise from the dead; therefore, unlike Christ, he cannot survive death. He may rebel against it, or try to rationalize it, or bring it or strive to accept it - but he cannot overcome it. His presence is at the same time the absence of God, and the journey he is on appears as a kind of recapitulation of human choices. The Man is therefore an Everyman located in the place of Jesus, yet, unable to overcome death, he is unable to replace him.

Such a reading of these four characters alludes to what I regard as the fundamental theme of *Gospels*, which is - as it has to be - resurrection. Everything that has been said here so far may suggest that it is a performance about an impossible resurrection, about a lost battle with death; that it is a lamentation over the irreclaimable 'intimations from recollections of

early childhood'. But this is not true. Although *Gospels* is filled with cries of despair, its finale is comprised of resurrection, which at the same time forms an act of revealing the presence of Jesus as the one who is not subject to death. For it is not true that Christ the Saviour is absent in *Gospels* - he is present at all times in what determines and imbues all of the elements of the performance, namely, the music.

I remind once again: in the performance of Theatre ZAR, the music, the song and the sound do not constitute an illustration, or even an equivalent means of expression. It is these elements that govern the whole opus and are (literally) the dominant voice. They also delineate a dramaturgical model that is superordinate to the characters' actions, which I regard as a liturgical model. To avoid possible misunderstanding, I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting that in particular moments of the performance the Choir sings hymns and epiphonema that could suggest a reading that certain sequences are counterparts to elements of either the Catholic Mass or the Divine Liturgy. Such an operation would be unoriginal, even banal. In fact, there is only one moment in the performance in which one could try to make an assumption that the song builds an analogy between the performance and the liturgy. This moment is Trisagion, which, during the Divine Liturgy, is sung before the reading from the Gospel, and which is heard in the performance before and during the 'sermon' of The Man, preceding the scene of Hesychia. Another example, also sonic, though not a song, is the sound produced by a little bell, which can be heard before the scene of the preparation to go.

In order to comprehend the superordinate dramaturgy of the sound in *Gospels*, one would need not to watch it but rather listen to it, treating it as an opus constructed entirely from sounds. It would turn out, then, that deprived of direct analogies with the liturgy, *Gospels* is, and likewise the Mass, an action that leads to a central experience, in which the revelation of the constant Presence is symbolized here not by the

Host but by the sound and the light. The journey that the people who perform in *Gospels* set out on and take throughout the performance ends on the threshold of darkness, on the threshold of the visible. Beyond, there is only the song - zar. If it alone is able to transcend the border between life and death and to remain in the space occupied by death, then it is beyond any doubt that the Resurrecting, to whose (un)presence all the elements of the performance allude, is present only in the song. It should not be surprising therefore that, in the synopsis of the performance, the sequence of zar is entitled *Lamentation of Jesus*. In this context, it seems entirely logical that the scene of the Resurrection is accomplished entirely by the song, this time directly alluding to the liturgy. One can of course see this sequence as a staging of Resurrection, but one cannot hear this scene as such. The image here emerges directly from the sound, and among the performers the characters that have earlier been singled out no longer exist. Candles are lit by 'three Marys', but also by a girl from the Choir. The performers, immersed in the song, come back to the position of operators who carry out the actions that emerge from the song and complement it. The song announces: 'Christ is Risen', and this message is confirmed by the light, which is raised to a high level to illuminate the darkness. The ultimate sense of this figure, which I have always intuitively considered as essential for *Gospels*, is therefore that from the darkness the light and the song emerge as signs of the presence of the Resurrected.

What is very important is the fact that these actions do not have the character of a ritual and do not belong to any rite. Moreover, they do not even require faith. They are provided for a direct experience which, together with the preceding journey through the darkness, forms a sensuous analogy with a liturgy construed in a direct way that leads, through symbols completed by faith, to the recognition of the Presence.

Translated by Tomasz Wierzbowski and Andrei Biziorek