

ACTIVATE YOUR MIND
ENGAGE YOUR SPIRIT

Summer Training Programs
Full-Time Conservatory

World-Class Actor Training
STELLADLER
STUDIO OF ACTING®
NEW YORK CITY



AMERICAN THEATRE

PUBLICATION OF THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP



Like



Follow



HOME NEWS ▾ FEATURES ▾ WATCH & LISTEN ▾ ONSTAGE NOW! ARCHIVE

ABOUT US ▾ **SUBSCRIBE**





Jarosław Fret, right, with Cutting Ball's Paige Rogers. (Photo by Magdalena Madra)

FEATURE | FEBRUARY 2015 | GLOBAL | THE GROTOWSKI CONNECTION | © JANUARY 16, 2015 | 0 COMMENTS

Teatr ZAR's Jarosław Fret, Feeling the Heat but Not Fretting

Mounting and touring an acclaimed new work about the Armenian genocide, 'Armine, Sister,' isn't even the biggest controversy swirling around the Polish director.

BY JIM O'QUINN

The pressure is on Jarosław Fret, and he knows it. If the 43-year-old artistic director of Poland's **Teatr ZAR** were a juggler, these are some of the balls he'd be hustling to keep in the air:

- The unprecedented success of his groundbreaking new work, *Armine, Sister*. The production, debuted last year by the Grotowski-inspired ensemble Fret founded 12 years

ago, has earned wide critical acclaim in Poland, including *Teatr* magazine's 2013 award for best production of the year. The gripping, musically virtuosic piece—an evocation of the near-extirmination of the Armenian people by the Turks in the early part of the 20th century—is slated for repeat performances next month (Feb. 20–23) in ZAR's home town, Wrocław; in Oslo (March 4–6); and on an upcoming international tour, including performances May 24–30 in the U.S., at the [San Francisco Arts Festival](#).

- The year-round buzz of activity he supervises at the [Grotowski Institute](#). Fret doubles as director of this historically significant theatre-development organization, which he has shepherded (with the help of ample funding) from its modest digs in Wrocław's elegantly restored central square to a spiffy new multipurpose facility across town on the tree-lined banks of the Oder River.
- Coordination of Wrocław's celebration as 2016's [European Capital of Culture](#). Supervising this multifaceted effort, dubbed "Spaces for Beauty" and intended to actively involve Wrocław's citizenry, is Fret's newest and most complicated role, and it has embroiled him in a squall of media controversy that shows no sign of letting up in coming months.

The controversy first: From the moment back in 2011 that Wrocław won its application for culture-capital status—a gateway to continent-wide prominence and increased tourism for the city, Poland's fourth largest—there were quarrels behind the scenes and in the press. After one director of the project stepped down and a second (activist theatre figure

Krzysztof Czyzewski) was asked to resign by the European commission in charge, the project was turned over to an eight-member board of curators (Fret among them), each responsible for a different cultural area.

Read Jim O'Quinn's in-depth feature on ZAR's collaboration with Cutting Ball Theater [here](#).

But when critics continued to carp about political cronyism, the lack of a unified artistic vision for the celebration and the planned importation to Wrocław of “transplants” like the itinerant European Theatre Olympics, the commission reacted by elevating Fret to the solo role of coordinator. Charged with representing the board in negotiations with the commission, the city and state Ministries of Culture and the myriad cultural interests involved—and presented, after the 2014 elections, with a radically downsized budget to work with—Fret was in effect left holding the bag.

The culture-capital festivities are still nearly a year away, but Fret's preliminary efforts have done little to quiet the naysayers, who continue to object to such tactics as the reductive skewering of “culture” into its traditional categories (music, visual arts, theatre, etc.); the emphasis on splashy, star-driven, pop-culture events; and the virtual omission from the program of Polish filmmaking (given that Wrocław was for a time the heart of the Polish film industry). Fret affirms that he wants to feature the nation's new, increasingly political

generation of theatre directors and playwrights and to help companies under financial duress, but his inattention to endangered stalwarts like [Teatr Polski](#) (the Wrocław house where Krystian Lupa regularly directs) has cast doubt on his commitment to inclusiveness.

Nevertheless, Fret's triple-threat status has brought him new recognition, nationally and beyond, not least for the creative strides on display in *Armine, Sister*.

The production, timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the advent of the Armenian genocide in 1915, is ZAR's first to incorporate performers from outside the troupe. The additions include master singers from Iran, Armenia and Turkey, versed in the liturgical musical traditions of those regions. Fret unearthed these collaborators—who come, pointedly, from societies representing both the aggressors and the victims in the conflict the play depicts—over the course of recent research expeditions to Istanbul, Yerevan, Jerusalem and thereabouts, and has melded their spare, haunting, rarely heard monodic singing techniques with ZAR's own flawless polyphonic singing. *Teatr* magazine's awestruck critic called the piece “a musical masterpiece.”

PAGES: 1

2

[VIEW IN SINGLE PAGE](#)

