

A Search for the Oldest Songs in the World

Out of the crucible of
modern Polish theatre
haunted by death, memory

comes Teatr ZAR,
and the primal power
of ancient song

By Jim O'Quinn



*Songs grow directly from reactions to life's travails;
they come from something "under the skin," something
wholly organic.*

—Jerzy Grotowski

HOW DID POLAND'S TEATR ZAR SET about rescuing the oldest songs in the world from the oblivion of history? And why has the Wrocław-based company—currently on a U.S. tour that began last month in Chicago and continues this month in Los Angeles—made these rare archaic songs the generative element of its extraordinary, virtuosic performances?

Jarosław Fret, the 38-year-old actor and student of ethnomusicology who founded Teatr ZAR in 2002, has forthright answers to these questions. The richly harmonic liturgical chants and funeral songs that inspire his company's work were collected, he will tell you, during a series of group expeditions between 1999 and 2003 to historic religious sites in Georgia, Greece, Bulgaria, Corsica, Sardinia, Egypt and Iran, including forays into isolated communities in the remote heights of the Caucasus Mountains, where musical traditions date back 2,000 years. The songs that he and his collaborators collected on these expeditions, he says, became their primary material, their fundamental means of theatrical communication, a metaphor that "gives you a very deep, essential understanding of what the process and tradition of life, which includes death, is."

Teatr ZAR's performances—which consist so far of a triptych of low-tech ensemble pieces, none of them more than 55 minutes long—have begun to attract rapturous attention from observers around the world, not least from theatre practitioners engaged in thematically or formally similar work. But Fret's passion for the revelatory power of ancient music as a theatrical source is part of a larger historical picture involving that sometimes elusive sphere known as "laboratory theatre." And Teatr ZAR's new status as an international ambassador for the most influential branch of contemporary Polish theatre—that indebted to the multifaceted, sometimes paradoxical investigations of Jerzy Grotowski—makes this a telling moment to revisit (here and in Stephen Nunns's companion article, page 31) some of the seismic shifts in world theatre that the laboratory movement has generated.

Fret, who combines his role of ZAR artistic director with the leadership, since 2004, of the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, has been a moving force in the most recent phases of that history. Under his directorship, the institute is in the process of expanding from its modest niche in the city's vibrant Old Market Square—the premises from 1965 to 1982 of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, where legendary works such as *Apocalypsis cum figuris* were first performed—to a spacious new multipurpose building (previously a rowing club for athletes) on Na Grobli Street along the tree-lined Oder River, scheduled to open next April. And when 2009 (marking 50 years since Grotowski

became artistic director of what would soon be known as the Laboratory Theatre, and 10 years since Grotowski's death in 1999) was declared by UNESCO the "Year of Grotowski," Fret and the institute geared up to host an unprecedented slate of international programs celebrating Grotowski's far-flung legacy [see the May/June '09 issue of *American Theatre*].

It was at one of these events—a two-week festival in June somewhat ostentatiously titled "The World as a Place of Truth"—that I saw performances of the three works in ZAR's repertoire, one of which, *Caesarean Section*, made its U.S. debut at Chicago's Millennium Park in November. This month, West Coast audiences have the chance to see all three parts of the triptych when it plays Dec. 1–3 at UCLA Live in Los Angeles. At home in Wrocław, even in the midst of a lineup of festival productions by the likes of Peter Brook, Tadashi Suzuki, Pina Bausch and Christian Lupa, ZAR's work made a singular, indelible impression.

The trilogy, on which ZAR has been working since its inception, begins with a somber, ritualistic piece called *Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, developed over the course of three years before it debuted in Brzezinka, the forested haven 25 miles northeast of Wrocław where Grotowski once conducted his paratheatrical research. (It subsequently had a successful run in Los Angeles as part of the 2007 UCLA Live International Theatre Festival, becoming the first and only ZAR production exported from Poland prior to the current tour.) Abstract in form and dimly lit, mostly by candles, some attached to hanging wooden wheels that become glistening chandeliers, *Gospels* draws upon the biblical story of the burial and resurrection of Lazarus, augmented by fragments of text from Dostoyevsky and Simone Weil. Its fluid and meticulous choreography replicates acts of childbirth, suffering, washing, communal mourning; its songs and chants infuse every image with an overpowering sense of the sacred.

Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide, the second, more extravagantly theatrical segment of the trilogy, involves its seven performers in lissome feats of physical strength and endurance and adds live instruments—cello, violin, accordion, percussion—to its musical arsenal. In considering Albert Camus's famous formulation—"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide"—*Caesarean Section*, Fret has said, concerns "not only artistic freedom but real freedom, and the limits of your life." Its central visual motif is an illuminated river of glass that slashes across the length of the stage, around which the barefoot performers (including the remarkable Ditte Berkeley, wearing shoes on her hands), dangerously convulse and writhe, perhaps in pain, perhaps in ecstasy. With its intimations of a love triangle and its exhilarating physicality, this performance is cruel, beautiful, sometimes slyly funny and altogether inimitable.

The final segment, *Anelli: The Calling*, still a work-in-progress when I saw it in Wrocław, uses Byzantine and

Sardinian hymns to pay tribute to Juliusz Slowacki, a Polish Romantic poet who journeyed to the Holy Land to write a stylized, Biblical poem (*Anbelli*) about possession by an angel. A deftly manipulated room-sized parachute of translucent cloth provides a phantasmagoric frame for this piece, which ends with the performers prone and silent beneath its folds (an echo, perhaps, of Grotowski's *The Constant Prince*, which ended with Ryszard Cieślak in a similar posture).

Spectators' responses to these intricately detailed and passionately realized works, with their intimations of mourning and mortality, punctuated by unsettling interludes of silence and pitch-black darkness, will vary, but indifference is not an option. "This is unlike anything I've ever sat through," wrote *Back Stage* critic Wenzel Jones after seeing *Gospels of Childhood* in Los Angeles. "The audience, perhaps in thrall to the sanctified aura that's left, sits in utter silence, applause seeming too coarse a response." L.A.-based director Guy Zimmerman, a fellow guest at the Wrocław festival, shared his impressions of *Caesarean Section* in a note to colleagues: "Performed with such fearless abandon the jaw drops. Humor here and there like dollops of blood. Halfway through, the ghost of Antonin Artaud shuffles in and sits next to the ghost of Grotowski in the back row, toothlessly grinning."

When we begin to catch the vibratory qualities [of an ancient song], this finds its rooting in the impulses and actions. And then, all of a sudden, that song begins to sing us. That ancient song sings me; I don't know anymore if I am finding that song or if I am that song. —Grotowski

THE WORLD OF "LABORATORY theatre"—a term deftly defined by Italian theatre scholar Mirella Schino in *Alchemists of the Stage* (2009) as "a protected, separate place where it is possible to continuously explore in order to perfect one's art or craft, without having to make compromises"—stretches across the 20th century from the Moscow studios of Stanislavsky to the Odin Teatret of Eugenio Barba in Denmark to Joan Littlewood's London Theatre Workshop to the Japanese mountain retreat of Tadashi Suzuki, and even, in significant instances such as Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre, into ensemble work in the U.S. But it was Grotowski who pushed the laboratory concept farthest, into the realms of ethics, spirituality, the internal truth of the actor, "a meeting with oneself."

His well-known focus on the body as an expressive instrument is

Grotowski's most evident bequest to posterity. But music—especially music retrieved from memory or from history—inspired him as well, especially in his later "theatre of sources" research. As Princeton-based theatre scholar Kathleen Cioffi has noted in her writing about Polish alternative theatre, there are a variety of groups now working in Poland that draw upon this research (conducted, ironically, largely outside their country) to combine Grotowski-inspired physicality with work on traditional or ancient songs—beginning with Włodzimierz Staniewski's distinguished company Gardzienice, founded in 1977, where Jarosław Fret became a member at age 20 and worked for a year-and-a-half. He subsequently worked (as did his ZAR cohort Kamila Klamut) with the Wrocław-based company Song of the Goat, another notable music-focused ensemble.

"It was Gardzienice that taught me how to approach the music, what it means to be inspired by traditional singing, and how to do your own dramaturgy related to it," says Fret, a handsome man with alert brown eyes and an unassuming manner. "Soon after coming to work there, I understood what I wanted to do."

Fret had direct access to Grotowski as well, first meeting him as a teenager in 1991 when Grotowski was presented an honorary doctorate—"I was listening to his speech in this very room at the institute," he remembers with a smile—and later assisting him organizing projects and productions. "I talked with him often, and worked with many of his collaborators. But the most important thing was watching theatre here, experiencing 'poor theatre.' Eventually this became the only work I could imagine."

It is astonishing work to watch. Rather than attempt to evoke the rarified atmosphere of ZAR's performances—which require studio-sized rooms with a limited number of spectators (in Wrocław it was 40 or so)—let me recount (with the assistance of eloquent notes from my festival colleague Barbara Lanciers, co-director of New York City's Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf) what I saw at a lecture-demonstration that Fret and his 11-member troupe offered visitors during the course of the festival.

It began with a slide show of images from ZAR's seminal research excursions, with Fret narrating: "At a Greek Orthodox

church in Tbilisi, there was one choir of old men, one of boys, and one mixed"—there they are, figures seemingly out of time—"each representing a different tradition. These choirs date back to the 10th

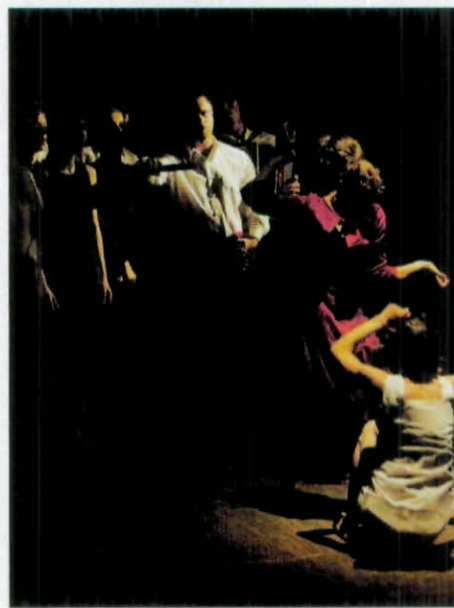
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COURTESY OF TEATR ZAR



GRZEGORZ PAWLAK



KEN REYNOLDS

From top, a Teatr ZAR expedition to Georgia; ZAR founder Jarosław Fret; ZAR's *Gospels of Childhood*.



Brzezinka, Grotowski's onetime rural retreat, where Teatr ZAR premiered *Gospels of Childhood*.

century in Georgia, and the churches even further, to the 6th century." Other images are sparer and greener, showing the Svaneti region, in the highest reaches of the Caucasus, where the homes and churches are shaped as towers. "Svaneti was our deepest meeting—it was there that we heard *zar*, the lamentations sung by a huge choir of men over and over for hours during funerals. We decided to name our work ZAR—not just the group but the work—as a recognition that we are just one element in an unbroken chain connecting us to our ancestors."

The oldest of the Svanetian songs, Fret explains, have archaic words and syllables that are no longer understood by the singers themselves, but continue to be performed. Many have pagan roots. "We heard a song there," he says, "whose purpose was to stop the rain, one to call forth the sun, one to send souls to heaven."

Fret calls the company forward. They are barefoot, the men in white shirts like college youths on a Sunday outing, the women in plain black or maroon shifts with dancers' body suits underneath. In semicircles or clusters, they begin to sing, avidly listening to each other's voices, sharing the polyphonies and rhythms of these mournful, yearning songs with gentle arm and body movements, conducting themselves with a focused intensity.

The songs roll from syllable to syllable, austere and thick, often with a gasp at the end of a phrase, sometimes coalescing into a shocking, piercing unity on a single note. The wall of sound fills the brick-walled studio

space like liquid; then, above the aural mass, the wail of a single female voice streams high, like a bird above a storm.

The song becomes the meaning itself through the vibratory qualities; even if one doesn't understand the words, reception alone of the vibratory qualities is enough.

—Grotowski

HOW DOES THIS REMARKABLE MUSIC

relate to the equally remarkable physical score in ZAR's performances? "Simply performing the songs was not enough—we went on to create movement and theatricality," Fret tells me later in an interview over coffee. "A song is like a journey, with a beginning and a destination. Parallel to the patterns of rhythm in the songs, we began to develop physical training, integrated work for physical action. Every single action must be found in the practice of singing, and only at the last phase do the two come together."

"We are all singers—first we share that. We establish relationships with one another based on patterns of breathing. When we sing, we have common feelings and perceptions—the next step is to open ourselves to actions, breathing together as one organism. The physical score is prepared out of improvisations, inspired by fragments of text, themes, perhaps poems. Putting it all together is a unique fusion of energy. The physical score acts in strong counterpoint to the music."

As absorbing as the company's physical virtuosity may be, it is sound that Fret gives pride of place. "Theatre is more than

something to be seen—to be heard is more essential. First we are listeners, secondarily we are seers. Human beings are much more deeply attached to sound than to sight—even in the womb, we hear speaking, singing, vibrations. We can even see each human being as a vibration, a unique sound."

Critics have alluded to the church-like aura of ZAR's performances, but Christian symbology is not what interests Fret. "Yes, I grew up in a Christian society, a very strong Christian family. But many in ZAR are not Christians....that is not the point of our work. Meeting with these songs means meeting with people whose details and differences you respect."

Perhaps Fret's modulation of his Grotowskian inheritance amounts to a distancing from both his mentor's insistence on the heroic "holy actor" (on the laying bare of "the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct," as Grotowski put it) and from his eventual rejection of the audience, in favor of a certain communal utility in the meeting of performer and spectator. "The only task for us as human beings is to remember," Fret suggests. "Our body has its unconscious memory, and the highest means for its discovery is art."

Memory, of course, is both personal and collective. Fret mentions that his own grandfather, who died when Fret was 17, was once a funeral singer, and that the final song in *Gospels of Childhood* is a kind of Polish *zar* that moved him deeply when it was sung at his grandfather's funeral. In a darker vein, he talks broodingly about Poland herself, which lost more than 5 million citizens during World War II. "Death is close to us here—the ground beneath us is made of bones and ashes," he remarks simply, as if to validate the emphasis in his work on mourning and redemption.

Barbara Lanciers asked Fret a fundamental question—"For you, what is the purpose of theatre?"—and the answer he gave seems more empathetic than the words Grotowski might have uttered on the subject: It is, Fret said, "to fill this void or emptiness, and share not only our pain with others—because pain is the only evidence that we live—but also the feelings and experiences of living...what it means to be alive." ■

Jim O'Quinn's trip to Poland was supported in part by Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theatre Development.

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