

The Zar's Visit: Teatr Zar

by Lisa Drostova

International Arts Festival Brings Polish Company to SF

When Poland's Teatr Zar brought *The Gospels of Childhood: Overture* to Los Angeles in 2007, it was well received not just by local critics (the *Los Angeles Times* named it one of "the top ten musical moments of the year" and "best new music theatre") but by Bay Area folk who came home and told San Francisco International Arts Festival director Andrew Wood in no uncertain terms that he had to bring the company here. So Wood flew to Wroclaw, Poland, to see for himself—and was struck by these spare yet devastating pieces based on a series of annual expeditions to sacred and liturgical Christian music's first homes: Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Greece and Iran; Sardinia and Corsica; and the Svaneti culture of the high Caucasus. According to Teatr Zar founder and Grotowski Institute director Jaroslaw Fret, these expeditions provided not only ancient source material to "decompose and recompose" into new works, but journeys into intense questions of community, connection, the experience of the flesh and the nature of theatre itself.

I caught up with Wood, Fret and the Institute's Magdalena Madra while they were here in January scouting sites for Teatr Zar's Northern California debut at the SFI AF. Despite the cold and their hectic travel schedule, Fret and Madra were determined to find the right combination of spaces.

Since 2002, when the work of composition began, what started as one piece has grown into *The Gospels of Childhood Triptych*. The first and third pieces, *Gospels of Childhood: Overture* and *Anhelli: The Calling* are well suited for churches—and have been performed at several in Europe—but, Fret explained, "The middle one [*Caesarian Section: Essays on Suicide*], because of its very active, almost aggressive nature, we prefer to present at a theatre studio, not at the church." They'd hoped to use St. Patrick's and a tented Union Square, but St. Patrick's has pews, and the Archdiocese didn't want them moved around.

So they chose St. Gregory's Episcopal Church on De Haro, which besides chairs has the advantage of being what Fret calls "a very special congregation"; they'd attended a service that morning and appreciated that "the whole service is about singing, and the entire congregation sings the entire service." For the triptych, Fret said, "The spectators will take part by starting at St. Gregory's for the first part, walking up a tall hill to [the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House] for *Caesarian Section*, and coming back to the church for *Anhelli*. It's a little pilgrimage." (A shuttle will be available between the venues.)

The project grew from Fret's curiosity about polyphony and the Gnostic elements in early Christianity, a natural extension of his work with experimental theatre pioneer Jerzy Grotowski when Grotowski was particularly interested in Eastern Orthodox music. In 2006, Fret became director of the Grotowski Institute, having already created Teatr Zar as the

Institute's resident company in 1999. "We went searching for songs as an extraordinarily human phenomenon," Fret explained. "We explored some of the oldest liturgical and funeral music in the world."

For this show, members of the multinational company went out in small groups, sometimes just two or three people according to the destination. The first journeys were a sort of reconnaissance. Learning Georgian chant, Fret laughed, "was like jumping head-first into very deep water where you have no idea how deep the water is." Besides building rapport with singers of the old music, training themselves to sing in this challenging style and learning "what kinds of harmonies are dedicated to what purposes," they had to find a way to set the music down.

"For the Svaneti singing we had to invent our own code, because it's not possible to write them in Western notation," Fret said. "Their harmonic system is completely different. They don't respect the octave. They sing in three voices, and between the first and the second voice there's something more than a small second but smaller than a big second. So it's really hard to write. Much later when we started *Anhelli* and we started working with the Byzantine tradition, we could learn the Byzantine notation." Byzantine notation is a relational, staffless system that looks like Arabic and was simplified in the nineteenth century—"simplified" here being relative; it's still an extremely challenging form to many Western-trained singers.

They tried to give something back to their teachers and shared what they were learning in other places. "When we were in Corsica, we went there with five women, knowing that the women's tradition in Corsica is about to be lost. So when our friends saw five very good singers, one from Spain, another from Denmark, another from Poland," the Corsicans asked the visitors to sing Vespers with them on Good Friday. Likewise, "in Svaneti, when we sang Corsican songs they were absolutely amazed and they started to find some similarities. We as a group of people are the vehicles bringing songs with our techniques, with our bodies, so we are spreading them in time and space. This way of approaching it, when they hear it they want to meet it, they have no doubt of our approach and our respect."

In some communities such as Sardinia, where the people were at the same time very open and very protective of their tradition (which stretches back unbroken to the Middle Ages), this spirit of collaboration and inquiry got the company much farther than just walking in with a digital recorder and a scientific attitude. "For us singing is not a matter of research," Fret said. "We are more focused on the human experience and that is what we would like to transfer onto the stage." Eventually they started bringing their informants to their home base for workshops, performances, and working sessions. "We spent summers on expeditions," he says, and "winters we spent inviting people to Wroclaw."

Fret calls the rich material gathered this way a "sonic icon": "The song gives you an image of the unknown, something that cannot be represented, like the face of the holy mother. When we compare our forms of singing to the original, it's like making a copy of an icon. Theatre is about human life and life itself, the dream of human life, the unbroken stream of energy. And the music is a vehicle, a tool, the river itself. It takes the form of the banks of the river. Of course our river, our theatre is shaped by us—it's a completely different formula and different energy from the original one—but in our performance you can hear the original shapes of the songs. Songs are performed in their original shapes or very transformed depending on the moment. [*Caesarian Section*] contains recomposed pieces from Svaneti and Corsica, but as well you can hear Satie's piano music, some tangos, some Piazzolla."

I asked if Fret was working with Grotowski's *plastiques* in the physical composition of the work. Grossly oversimplified, *les exercices plastiques* are technical, physical isolations that Grotowski developed to provide what NYU teacher and Grotowski student Stephen Wangh calls “muscular containers” for emotion.

Fret demurred. “Our physical work is limited by the stage, the studio, our own research and development. We try to unite the phenomenon of organicity with the phenomenon of composition. They are quite opposite corners. I really don’t believe in a kind of formula. There is no difference in training a dancer or singer to breathe. Between the music and the physical, there should be parallel development.” Composition was inspired by experience of the music and the sounds of the body used as an instrument (especially when it impacts other things, such as the floor). Sometimes this meant reining in improvisations or the inclination to rely too heavily on movement vocabularies from outside sources.

While *Caesarian Section: Essays on Suicide* explores the impulse toward (and away from) self-destruction, *The Gospels of Childhood: Overture* intertwines the story of Lazarus and his sisters with that of Mary Magdalene as one of the disciples, and *Anhelli: The Calling* is a tribute to a poem published in 1838 by Juliusz Słowacki about the epic journey of a young man, a “chosen one” awaited by Polish exiles in Siberia. Gorgeous singing and haunting instrumentation are integrated with precise, explosive physicality (weight sharing, lifts, a barefoot woman dancing convulsively in a field of broken glass). Simply costumed performers work in simply dressed spaces with everyday props, yet the effect is bracing. *Caesarian Section* features a striking river of light where the aforementioned broken glass has been swept meditatively into an illuminated gap in the floor. But this is not about spectacle; it’s about immediate, visceral connection.

In Fret’s words, “The music and the song is the best director in the world. The musical core of our performances is saying something in a very direct way about feeling, but we are not *representing* the feeling. In *Caesarian Section*, we’re talking about suicide, the question of the limits of our freedom. Theatre is not to write the lecture; it’s to write the experience. And people ask, ‘Yes, but what’s the music about?’ The music’s about, ‘What do you feel listening to the music?’ Of course your feelings are the most important subject of my direction. I’m not directing actors; I’m directing spectators, using actors, music, visuals.”

Clearly, Fret and his collaborators don’t settle for small questions. “The biggest challenge is how to talk about death in theatre, how to express the most important horizon of our lives. It’s not enough to lay down on the floor, it’s not enough to hit someone with an artificial knife; I’m not interested. Being alive, we can’t express the totality of our life. Theatre brings me the answers. It’s something very simple and very serious. I believe with music we can catch something that is on the edge. We can’t cross the border, but let’s catch something about the border itself. The border with death, how thick is it? How big is the gap between life and the world close by? A world of light or of darkness, I don’t know, but let’s try to measure how big is the world and what is really between.”

Teatr Zar’s *The Gospels of Childhood Triptych* runs May 19–25 (no performance Sunday). Audiences can see all or part of the triptych; tickets to each section are sold separately. More information and tickets are available at sfiaf.org and brownpapertickets.com.

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