

Breathing as one

Teatr ZAR takes audiences on a journey of polyphonic sound where compact simplicity penetrates through and through, uniting mind, body and soul as one. So complete is this call upon the wholeness of human being that, at the end of a ZAR performance, listeners- spectators sit in silence, touched by grace. Applause at such a moment of profound spiritual illumination for some, of contemplation for others and of something palpable but indefinable for still more, would seem to be nothing short of sacrilege. The performers leave, never to come back for the bows and other such ceremonies of theatregoing. But, in the quiet, the energy they have released in the space is active, weaving between the members of the audience, as it had done during the performance, until they break its enveloping flow and leave, in their turn. From start to finish, a ZAR performance can be a momentous experience.

The group was formed between 1999 and 2003 when it undertook expeditions to Georgia in search of what are probably the oldest polyphonic forms in the world. Here, through the oral transmission of master to pupils, it learned 'Zar', funeral songs more than 2,000 years old and in a forgotten language of the Svaneti people, who inhabit north-western Georgia. These and other polyphonic songs and chants gathered principally from Bulgaria, Greece, Corsica and, more recently, Sardinia provided the material for the group's triptych, *Gospels of Childhood* (2003), *Caesarean Section/Essays on Suicide* (2007) and *Anhelli/The Calling*, which premieres in 2009.

From its inception, Teatr ZAR's aim has been to connect with the oldest traditions of music, rooted in Christianity, so as to reach the past. By doing this, performers and audiences come towards something bigger than themselves: they transcend their ego, one might say, and achieve, through the chain of generations embodied in song and passed on across time, something like an openness of spirit that calibrates their present. It is perhaps for this reason that Jarosław Fret, the leader of ZAR, believes that our relationship with the past is of uppermost importance, allowing us to understand who we are, as part of humanity. He certainly believes, as did his great compatriot, director and theatre researcher, Jerzy Grotowski, that theatre has its deepest sources in song; and this makes singing indispensable for the creation of theatre work. Singing is fundamental for generating energy, and is a means of exploring the emotions hidden somewhere deep inside performers. But it also frees these emotions, which the listeners-spectators recognise and catch imperceptibly, as if through their very pores. Theatre in such conditions is, for ZAR, the point where people's lives meet.

ZAR does not merely reproduce the songs it uses, but adapts them to the scenes developed through movement or with instrumental music played by the same performers who sing – it could be cello, accordion, piano and an occasional wind instrument or saw taken from folk music. Spoken texts are added, sometimes in counterpoint to music or song, as happens with the story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha from the Gospel according to St John in *Gospels from Childhood*. At other times, speech, frequently as a solo voice, anticipates a strong instrumental or vocal sequence, as happens in *Caesarean Section*. Or else it works in tandem with a movement duo – movement duets being typical of the triptych – which requires great precision and timing together with acrobatic skill. Then, again, it is used minimally for dramatic effect. In all cases, speech, like movement and instrumental music, is an integral part of the patterns of breathing established, in the first instance, through song. The quality of these patterns changes for the various fragments that make up each part of the triptych and changes, as well, with what emerges as the overall character of each part. The liturgical quality of sound and

movement in *Gospels of Childhood*, for instance, is sustained by the different resonances of bells and gongs, spaced very carefully through the work. Actions of washing, which are full of biblical associations, strengthen its ritual aura. *Caesarean Section*, by contrast, has the dynamics of dance theatre and, for all its fleeting moments of delicate humour, has, in moments, the raw power of tragedy. Its musical structure is more complex than that of *Gospels*, the latter's theme of resurrection having now been replaced, once again in fractured pieces, by the existential agony of suicide. *Anhelli* is essentially a mystery, albeit inspired by Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Slowacki's journey to the Holy Land. This work has the hush, the misterium, appropriate for a subject dealing with possession by an angel.

Flames of burning candles contribute to the special atmosphere of ZAR performances, yet they also give light, both physically and figuratively. The performers are totally focused on what they are doing and are acutely aware of their partnerships with each other as they sing, play, move and speak. Their group harmony is, indeed, in the spirit of music, inviting audience members to breathe with them, as one.

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