

# Short, sacred, haunting

Polish troupe Teatr Zar finds beauty in abstract ritual with its riveting 'Gospels of Childhood.'

By MARK SWED  
Times Staff Writer

"Gospels of Childhood," a passingly strange rite from Poland, begins with a "closing," soon thereafter moves on to infinity, journeys with death and sets the alarm for morning (and mourning) wake-up call. All that in the first few minutes of a short, though timeless, lamentation and moody celebration.

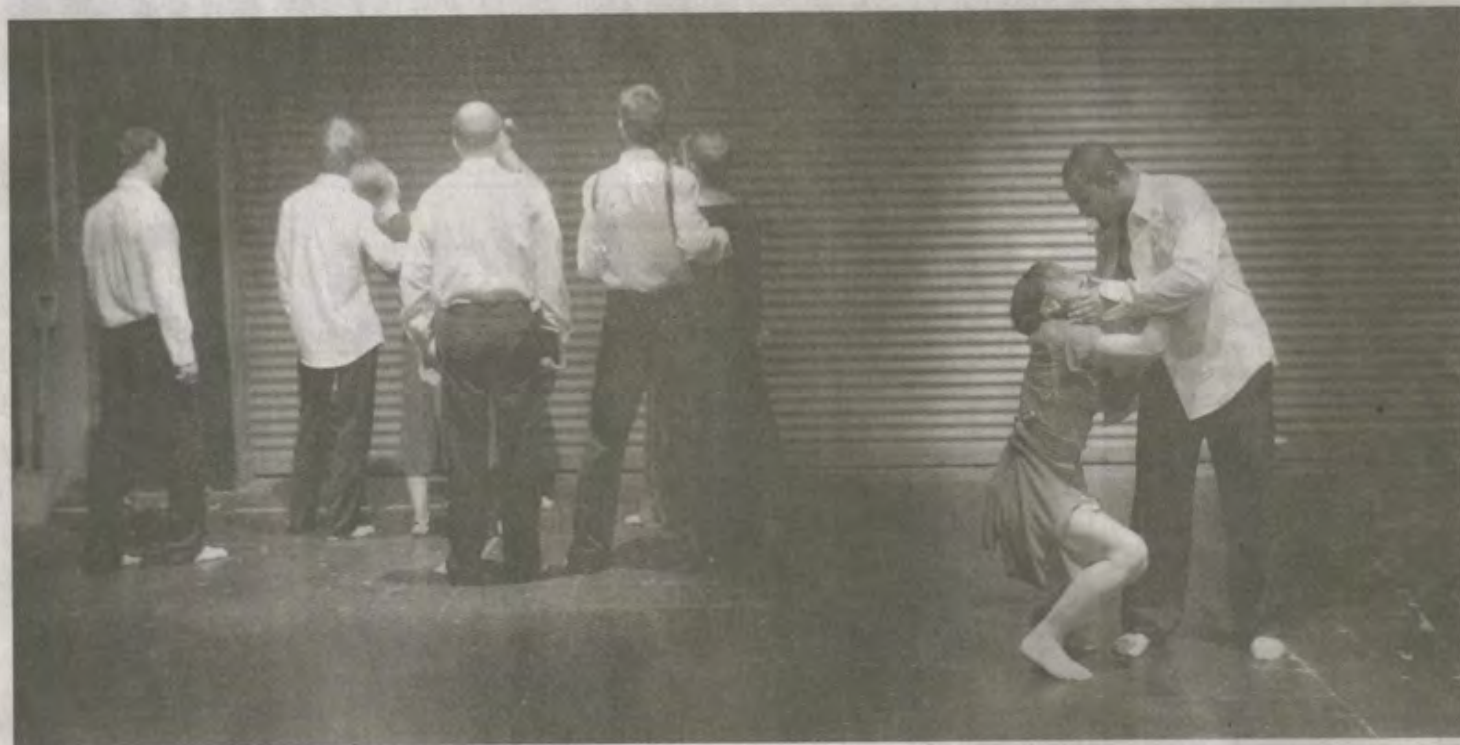
UCLA Live began the 2007 International Theatre Festival in September with an audience seated around the stage of the Freud Playhouse for a confrontational, testosterone-overdose Scottish extravaganza, "Black Watch." For this year's final festival production, the audience once more eavesdrops from bleachers on stage, this time for Tuesday's U.S. debut of Teatr Zar — a Warsaw collective that follows in the footsteps of the Polish theatrical innovator, Jerzy Grotowski. A profane, in-your-face "Black Watch" now makes way for a sacred, million-miles-away, beauteous bleak watch.

Teatr Zar takes its inspiration from afar. The company, an international troupe led by Jaroslaw Fret, traveled to the remote villages of the Svanetian Mountains in the Georgian Republic to explore a tradition of polyphonic singing. This began possibly a century before it did in the West, with Perotin in the 12th century. Specific meaning has gone out of these songs, since aspects of the ancient Svan language have been lost. The texts have become affectless syllables. But the musical implications of lamentation and wonder are still apparent.

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ROBERT LACHMAN Los Angeles Times  
TE: Kamila Klamut and Jaroslaw Blaszczyk, at rear.



Photographs by ROBERT LACHMAN Los Angeles Times

U.S. DEBUT: Poland's Teatr Zar, at UCLA's Freud Playhouse, is a Warsaw collective that follows in the footsteps of Jerzy Grotowski.

## Chant of lamentation and wonder

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The company also pulls from here and there — Bulgarian folk chant, ancient Greek theatrical rites. The 19 parts of "Gospels of Childhood" consist of Georgian liturgy, Svan songs, biblical allusions (Greek, Roman and Gnostic) and a touch of relatively modern angst, courtesy of Dostoyevsky and French philosopher Simone Weil. Birth and death are exercised and exorcised. The main characters are Mary Magdalene and her sister, Martha, but mainly they are the dancer in the orange dress (Kamila Klamut) and the dancer in the red dress (Ditte Berkeley).

We enter the theater as the performance has begun. A group standing in a circle sings. A table holds candles and cloth. A bucket is for washing. Death, one senses, is being prepared for.

The chanting, which occurs throughout most of the hour, is more homophonic than polyphonic — the Svans may have been ahead of the West, but they hadn't actually stumbled upon counterpoint. No matter, because the consonances, full of open fifths, are gorgeous. The rendering is solemn, but folk elements, including a touch of lively fiddling, occasionally enter into the ceremony. The sections in the libretto are often specific. The "Closing" is presumably what is being sung for the opening. Some parts have texts in



ABSTRACT EXPRESSIVENESS: The work, with Kamila Klamut, combines ancient and modern elements.

various languages, some do not. Among the sections without are those of three young men in the fiery burning furnace, a stoning and Jesus' lamentation. All are highly ritualized. Suffering is the thread, whether of birth or death.

But in the end, "Gospels of Childhood" reduces to abstraction, to song and movement, to candlelight and pitch-black darkness. My guess is that Teatr Zar's main motivation is the

breaking down of theatrical defenses, theirs and ours.

The company asks us not to refer to the synopsis while in the theater — not that there is enough light and even if there were, the text would not have supplied illumination. Instead, one watches bodies move to and against the music. One views pain and pleasure, birth and death as mysterious forces. One watches nonsensical chant made somewhat sensible

### 'Gospels of Childhood'

Where: Freud Playhouse, UCLA campus, Westwood

When: 8 p.m. today and Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday

Ends: Sunday

Price: \$38

Contact: (310) 825-2101

Running time: 54 minutes

through movement but also left to its own emotional devices in the dark.

At the end, the candles are lit on spoked wheels suspended at different heights on ropes and set gently swaying. The cast walks off stage and never returns. The audience sits patiently in meditative silence for several minutes (or less if someone impatiently yells an irritated bravo, which is what happened Tuesday). You leave, your thoughts your own.

The running time above is personal. The show begins when you enter. It ends when you decide to leave. But Teatr Zar haunts, and I'd add hours, maybe days to that 54 minutes.

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