

THE GOSPELS OF CHILDHOOD AT BRZEZINKA

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In November of 1971, Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre purchased an isolated farm deep in the forest near the village of Brzezinka, forty-six kilometers from its home base in Wrocław. Working spaces and modest accommodation were created there, but Grotowski chose to keep it in an remote place, without running water or electricity. It served as the home to his company's experiments in Paratheatre and Theatre of Sources until the announcement of martial law in Poland in December of 1981. The following August, Grotowski left Poland and never returned to Brzezinka. The space was abandoned and fell into disrepair until finally, in 2001, the Wrocław authorities, at the urging of the Grotowski Centre, repaired the failing roof and stabilized the building. The following year other renovations restored it to its appearance in the 1970s, and it has since served as a study and workcenter for theatrical experimentation.

The group primarily associated with the Brzezinka Workcenter today is the Teatr ZAR, which between 1999 and 2002 undertook four expeditions into the remote Caucasus mountains of Georgia and Armenia, where, in the tradition of Grotowski's Theatre of Sources, they studied the performance of the two-thousand-year-old polyphonic singing in the world. From this research grew their *Gospels of Childhood* performance, which was developed at the Brzezinka Workcenter and first performed there in October 2003. It is still presented from time to time at Brzezinka, where I witnessed it in December of 2006.

The Gospels of Childhood performance was embedded in a full evening, which began with a bus trip from Grotowski Centre in Wrocław. The bus could not approach the forest retreat, hidden away in the woods, so a long walk along a primitive track was necessary, with the minimal necessary lighting provided by torches borne by representatives from the retreat. After a gathering and some light refreshments in a rough wooden room where simple wood-burning fireplaces provided welcome relief from the December cold and damp, we were escorted to a neighboring larger space where several sections of simple wooden bleachers provided seating along one side of the rectangular room where the action took place.



The Brzezinka Workcenter in Brzezinka, Poland



The Gospels of Childhood, Teatr ZAR

The performance itself wove together a variety of musical and narrative strands, the former primarily from the Georgian tradition and from the liturgical songs of the Orthodox Republic of Monks at Athos, the latter from various Gnostic writings from the beginning of Christianity. These included the claimed writings of Mary Magdalene, Philip, and Thomas, supplemented by material from Dostoevsky and Simone Weil. The first part of the performance was built around the apochryphal "testimony of Mary Magdalene," the second around the story of Lazarus, evoked through the mouths of his sisters Marta and Maria—Maria being, according to some Gnostic writings, the same as Mary Magdalene. The exclusive use of traditional, chanting of candles for illumination (the site possessing no electricity), the neutral dress of the performers, and the religious text gave to much of the performance the feeling of the celebration of some ancient religious ritual.

Although the actors flowed in and out of a central choral group, singing Svaneti songs and Greek and Georgian liturgical chants, individual actors would from time to time emerge from the group to assume particular roles, such as that of Jesus or Lazarus. Two women, set apart from the rest of the reddish tint of their robes, represented the sisters Mary and Martha, and accompanied each of the sections of the work with a continuously changing *pas de deux*, sometimes violent, sometimes suggesting classic statuary. The overall impression was distinctly elegiac, the mourning of the sisters of Lazarus melding into the mourning of the Mary's over the dead Christ. Both, however, culminate in the ecstatic celebration of resurrection. Chanting the exultant Easter Song from the Athos Christos anesti, the actors light candles placed in circles upon wheels suspended from the ceiling in various locations in the room, raise them to serve as a kind of rough chandeliers, and then depart into the darkness, leaving the audience seated in an empty hall, brightly illuminated by the slowly turning lights, with the ancient chants still echoing in their memory.