

Sing to Remember
Mirosław Kocur

Armine, Sister, the most recent oratorio by the ZAR Theatre, is a musical masterpiece. Today a message so consistent, so clear, and so thrilling, expressed mainly by singing and noise, can be rarely heard in theatre.

In our eyes, once again, an attempt to annihilate a magnificent culture is undertaken. A temple which we enter in the beginning of the performance, turns into garbage in the end. That is how churches in eastern Turkey look like. Once it was the area of flourishing civilization of Armenians, the world's oldest Christian nation. As early as in 301, king Tiridates III of Armenia established Christianity as the state religion of his kingdom. Spiritual culture proved to be more durable than material one.

Modern history of Armenians seems to be even more tragic than history of Poles. Our national martyrdom and our suffering are known in the world and documented, whereas the Armenian genocide is still denied by the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Between 1895 and 1915 Turks carried out ethnic cleansing in areas of western Armenia, killing at least one and a half million people. Just like the Jedwabne pogrom, the slaughter of Armenians in Anatolia was performed by another persecuted nation, in this case by Kurds. Actors of the ZAR Theatre told me that when they visited one of ruined churches in the east of Turkey, local residents of those areas, mostly Kurds, had come to the Polish artists to apologize for the atrocities committed by their grandparents on Armenians. After cleansing Anatolia of Armenians, Turks began persecutions of Kurds. The recent captors turned to victims themselves.

Composition of the performance *Armine, Sister* has been completely subordinated to sonic dramaturgy. Music is an archive of memory, as an Oxford-based paleo-anthropologist Iain Morley proves in his book *The Prehistory of Music* (Oxford 2013). Oral cultures – or persecuted cultures which are forced to use orality – survived in songs. Singing strengthens a community, preserves memory and knowledge of ancient events. Morley quotes many new studies, suggesting that singing and dancing are the sources of language. Dancing and singing preceded understanding. For a long time both of these practices had to be inseparable, as it is indicated by recent brain research. The same motor neurons which are responsible for all movements of our bodies, enable us to utter sounds and to experience emotions. A song expresses memory of a dancer's body as fully as possible.

Christianity was founded on a very particular experience of corporeality: the passion and resurrection, martyrdom and promise of salvation. Memory of the wounded body of Christ is re-acted in Eucharistic liturgy. Every suffering Christian, and also every suffering Christian nation – like Armenians or Poles – recalls and embodies the passion of Jesus with its fate.

The performance by the ZAR Theatre develops like an Easter Mass, from the Gospel of St. Luke [?] to the song of resurrection in the final. The theatre hall has been turned into the interior of a church. Huge, rhythmically set pillars not only make the entire space monumental, but also obscure the view, making each viewer watch the performance differently. Sometimes one has to lean quite a lot to see anything. The audience, sitting on the benches along the walls, is even forced to be active. Such conceived space transforms all participants of the event into performers.

Jerzy Gurawski, a legendary architect of space in the most famous productions of the Teatr Laboratorium, told me once that he had suggested Grotowski to build a performance in which the action would be partially obscured to the audience. These plans never came to fruition because Grotowski abandoned theatre of productions. Three decades later, Jaroslaw Fret completed a similar project at the Jerzy Grotowski Institute, although he had never heard about the Gurawski's idea before.

The structure of the ZAR Theatre performance was composed around one leading event, namely destruction of a temple. Magnificent chants, sung in Armenian, Persian and Kurdish languages, are obscured by banging hammers. Four half-naked men, under the command of Przemyslaw Błaszczyk, with a great noise dismantle huge wooden pillars reinforced with iron buckles. First they open lower buckles with hammers and move the pillars, disrupting sacred order of the space. Then remove upper buckles. Sand pours from cracked pillars. Dismantling continues. Three pillars are transformed into giant tripod/gallows. They will be dismantled, too. In the final, all the pillars are either removed to the side, or destroyed, and sand covers the entire floor, along with all garbage and a motionless female body. The world returns to chaos.

Each subsequent step of demolishing the temple is pointed with poignant songs in the Kurdish language, the language of the slayers. Dengbej Kazo, a Kurd born in Van, cultivates a tradition of wandering singers and storytellers, officially forbidden in Turkey. He seems to break enormous pillars with his powerful voice. Kurdish monodies contrast painfully with Armenian choral songs, initiated by Aram Kerovpyan, a master of liturgical chant in the Armenian cathedral in Paris. Kerovpyan is a doctor of musicology, and deepens his artistic works with scientific studies. The performance is accompanied by equally outstanding performers. Armenian singers Virginia Pattie Kerovpyan and Murat İclinalça a musician Vahan Kerovpyan, and specialists in Persian classical singing, sisters Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat from Iran.

Jaroslaw Fret made an excellent choice of traditional repertoire of songs, which he rearranged and orchestrated. Vocal competence of the team of the ZAR Theatre matches the most outstanding masters of vocal traditions in the world. Numerous expeditions have allowed the artists to learn different vocal techniques in practice. Today they belong to few experts of many rare performative traditions. Their performances and concerts evoke memory of little-known or often forgotten cultures. The most beautiful aria in *Armine, Sister* is performed by Ditte Berkeley of the ZAR Theatre, the artist of angelic voice, exceptionally flexible body, and great acting talent.

In the performance not a single word is uttered in Polish. I was not always able to recognize the language of songs. I wonder how the production will be received by Armenians, Persians, or Kurds. I hope that Fret will publish the soundtrack one day.

The confrontation of music with the noise of hammers and falling doors painfully embodies intrusion of violence into culture. The four men in the performance represent an anonymous system of repression. The four women individually suffer, individually miscarry, individually love and caress, and, by the end of the performance, when there is no more music, they individually bury their bodies in the sand. They are the chorus of ancient tragedy. In the performance, their femininity symbolizes passivity in basic sense: vulnerability and helplessness confronted with rape. However, a raped woman's body is also body of a mother, by her physicality bound with her son, like Mary is bound with Jesus. The performance

preserves this gender division between the rapists and the raped until the end. There is no reconciliation of men and women. Is such a solution supposed to invoke the traditional social order, still present in some confessional states? Perhaps this division reflects the traditional structure of the Armenian societies reached by the artists during their ethnographic exploration. In *Armine*, *Sister* tortured and silent woman's body embodies Armenia. Is it really no hope for this nation?

For the time being, we need to sing with Armenians to remember.