

PERFORMANCE: REVIEW

## Pomegranate Juice Trickles Like Blood in Teatr ZAR's Armenian Genocide Production



A scene from Teatr ZAR's *Armine, Sister*. Photo by Irene Lipinska.

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MAY 25, 2015

An enormous life-size image greets visitors entering the warehouse-like Herbst Pavilion for *Armine, Sister*.

It's the ruined stone archway of an abandoned church, projected onto a giant screen. As our first hint and symbol of the living 100-year-old history of the Armenian genocide, it forms the entrance proper to the piece we are about to see.

Sunday night's Bay Area premiere of *Armine, Sister* by Teatr ZAR, the acclaimed resident theater company at the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, Poland, capped opening weekend of the San Francisco International Arts Festival.

The work culminates a three-year investigation into collective memory and conscience by Teatr ZAR and is a potent collage of images and sounds that bear witness to a history that is still met with formal silence in Turkey.

Structured less as a narrative than a rigorous performance installation, *Armine, Sister* offers different scenes and impressions depending on where you sit.

The piece unfolds in a rectangular playing area at the back of the Pavilion, amid a set of moveable columns echoing those we've seen in the abandoned church.

As the audience enters, the air is already alive with the gorgeous and haunting melodies that will run almost nonstop throughout the 80-minute piece. The soundtrack comprises various traditional songs of Asia Minor, Anatolia and Iran performed by expert musicians.

Soon, bodies are moving all around the playing area. Dressed in black, the performers evoke scenes of violent invasion.

The men tap long staffs with nooses at the end in unison along the floor and pound them against free-floating doors held up by fellow performers.

The women, in simple black dresses, strike poses of fear, defiance, resistance, and anguish. The performers transform thin sheets of unleavened bread, fruit, red yarn—simple staples of life — into ghastly byproducts of violence: On a metal bed-frame, a performer crushes pomegranates onto her legs, where the juice trickles and pools like blood.



A scene from Teatr ZAR's *Armine, Sister*. Photo by Irene Lipinska.

These and many more images come in a torrent of exacting movement, pulsing and crashing soundscapes, aching melodies, and detailed crepuscular lighting.

The final segment comes, by contrast, in complete silence.

Solitary women present a mosaic of scenes evoking, in precise and repeating gestures, the pain and burden of memory.

The at times wrenching but compelling journey we take in *Armine, Sister* started over five years ago, according to ZAR's soft-spoken but eloquent artistic director, Jaroslaw Fret, who introduces the piece while standing before the image of the ruined church at the entrance to the theater.

There Fret also prepares his audience for what lies ahead by explaining the role theater can play in asking the most urgent questions of history and ourselves.

"I hope, believe," Fret says, "that art brings as much answer to who they were, and who we are now, 100 years after."