



Teatr Zar

Riveting "Caesarian Section," part of Teatr Zar's "The Gospels of Childhood Triptych," in the S.F. International Arts Festival.

THEATER REVIEW

'Gospels' goes above and beyond

By Robert Hurwitt

CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

The voices gather, intertwine and echo off the walls in ancient liturgical polyphonies and deep-throated Bulgarian wails. The physical dexterity of the performers astonishes, whether in dance, teetering atop chairs, slamming themselves on the floor or just sitting with a bodily concentration that infuses stillness with intensity.

The theatrical jewel in this year's San Francisco International Arts Festival crown, Poland's Teatr Zar opened Thursday with the regional premiere of its signature "Gospels of Childhood Triptych." Leading practitioners of the widely influential aesthetics of Jerzy

"Gospels" continues on E6



The Gospels of Childhood Triptych: Experimental drama. Created and performed by Teatr Zar (Poland). Directed by Jaroslaw Fret. Through Thurs. San Francisco International Arts Festival, St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, 500 De Haro St., S.F. \$25-\$75. (800) 838-3006. www.sfiarf.org.

Above and beyond in experimental drama

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Grotowski, the troupe is performing three deeply thematically interlinked pieces nightly in two locations.

The first and third parts of the trilogy, "Overture" and "Anhelli: The Calling," are staged in the beautiful St. Gregory's Episcopal Church at the base of Potrero Hill. Part two, "Caesarian Section," is at the top of the hill in Potrero Hill Neighborhood House. Each show is less than an hour long, but packed with enough theatrical-mystical density for a full experience, yet the three-part package also seems to fly by.

It's a huge gift from the festival to the city, a must-see for students and practitioners of all sorts of theater, physical performance, early music and/or Christianity or the esoterica of spiritual transcendence through art — the focus of the decade of research that led to these ensemble works. It isn't for everybody, however. These are non-linear, impressionistic works that can be as remote and opaque as they are visually and vocally transporting.

"Overture," subtitled "Fragments on Intimations of Immor-

ality From Recollections of Early Childhood," digs into the story of Lazarus, the Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene and ancient Christian and pre-Christian song in a confusing but engrossing blend of musical richness and physical skill, particularly the transformative performances of Ditte Berkeley and Nini Julia Bang.

"Anhelli," which has something to do with the Polish poet Juliusz Slowacki and "how to make an angel transit through a human body," is, for me, the most remote and least interesting piece. "Caesarian," however, is riveting, perhaps because it's the most earthbound and theatrical panel of the triptych.

Berkeley and the no-less-astonishing Matej Matejka and Emma Bonnici dance, court, fight, teeter, wail and nearly fly atop and around a thin stream of broken glass. Piano, harmonium and cellos complement the rich vocals as Corsican, Bulgarian and Icelandic melodies tango with Astor Piazzolla. As glass flakes fall to the crystalline notes of Erik Satie, Zar transcends the moment.

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