

San Francisco International Arts Festival: Áine Ryan ('Kitty in the Lane') and Teatr ZAR ('Armine, Sister') (*****)

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by Charles Kruger



This reviewer is a voting associate member of the San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle (SFBATCC)

The San Francisco International Arts Festival is in residence at Fort Mason through June 7, presenting work from around the world on the theme of "Bearing Witness: Surveillance in the Drone Age." The SFIAF, established in 2003, is the largest festival of its kind in the Western United States. For the 2015 edition, SFIAF is presenting the work of more than 70 Bay Area ensembles and individuals, plus numerous additional artists from around the world. The festival features dance, music, theatre, visual art, and documentary films. It is enormous and stupendous.

This past week, I was able to attend performances by two remarkable international companies. From Ireland, I saw Áine Ryan's stunning one woman play "Kitty in the Lane," and from the Grotowski Institute in Warsaw, Teatr ZAR's moving and memorable "Armine, Sister." Both performances bear witness and respond deeply and compassionately to horrible events.



Áine Ryan as "Kitty in the Lane." Photo Credit: San Francisco International Arts Festival.

"Kitty in the Lane" written by and starring Áine Ryan. Presented by Studio Perform from the Republic of Ireland. U. S. Debut.

Áine Ryan's "Kitty in the Lane" is an extended monologue by Kitty, who lives in poverty on an isolated lane in rural Ireland. The name Kitty suggests a cat, not a human being, and indeed when we meet her she seems to be not quite like an ordinary person. She has a disturbingly fay presence, ballet dancer thin with an odd angular physicality. She moves like a puppet being jerked on strings, very mechanically, as if her soul is missing. Her personality is as hard as nails. It is a powerful choice in that even before we hear Kitty's story, we can see that she is damaged. Her story emerges gradually — she is caring for a sick father. She loves a brother who is absent. She has an unreliable boyfriend. Watching her, we can see something is terribly wrong, that she is not merely damaged, but monstrous. Slowly, we come to understand why she is, indeed a monster, and what has made her so. It is the story of a life of grinding poverty and oppression, of every imaginable sort. There is sexual abuse, emotional abuse, death, rape, and more. It is unrelenting. And yet, we see glimpses of a charming lass, a beautiful, intelligent, loving lady and in the midst of our horror at what she has become, we are charmed and saddened by the glimpses of what she might have been. All of this is presented by Ryan in a fabulously accomplished piece of acting in which she creates an entire community of characters from Kitty's competitive best friend, to her athlete brother, her oppressive father, the townspeople, her boyfriend, a corrupt constable who raped her at her own brother's funeral. The play is a devastating indictment of systemic poverty, unchecked patriarchy, and the damage it wrecks on the innocent. How devastating? Even though there is no nudity or obvious obscenity, several audience members walked out on the performance which I attended. They were clearly upset by the intensity of the piece. Those that remained, however, experienced a profound catharsis by the time it was over, and the applause was appropriately thunderous.

In the end, we know that Kitty is a monster, guilty of unspeakable crimes, and yet we cannot judge her too harshly; the realities of the life that made her are too clearly in evidence. Ryan makes us love and understand Kitty, crimes and all, an extraordinary accomplishment both as playwright and actress. 'Kitty in the Lane' is Ryan's playwrighting debut. It will certainly not be her last hurrah!

"Kitty in the Lane," produced by Studio Perform and the San Francisco International Arts Festival. Written and performed by Áine Ryan. Technical Design and Stage Management: Emily Matthews, Gemma Miller. Music Arrangement: Cáit Ryan, Ella Stapleton, recording by Eoin Ryan.



An image from Teatr ZAR's "Armine, Sister." Photo Credit: Irena Lapińska.

"Armine, Sister" by Teatr Zar from the Grotowski Institute in Warsaw.

Teatr ZAR is the world's premiere proponent of the vision of the late Polish genius Jerzy Grotowski, universally recognized as one of the most important and influential directors in world theatre of the past 50 years. Grotowski was a proponent of what he called "poor theatre" — a theatre which stresses above all the physical presence of the actor in direct relation to the spectators, as opposed to spectacle. His practice also included the use of elemental scenic elements such as fire and water manipulated by actors, and sound created entirely by actors. In later years, he expressed an interest in what he called "objective drama" — movements, sounds, gestures, properties which would be evocative in and of themselves, without necessarily being attached to a narrative.

With "Armine, Sister," Teatr Zar challenges the reviewer to come up with superlatives that can do justice to this dazzling demonstration of what such "poor theatre" can accomplish. Here are a few that come to mind: brilliant, innovative, original, thrilling, stunning, spectacular, moving, profound, authentic, inspired.

Years in the making (and it shows), "Armine, Sister" is a contemplative witness of the Armenian

Genocide in Anatolia which occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. The company traveled to small towns and villages in Anatolia to work with and learn to master the style of liturgical singing practiced by the Orthodox Church in Armenia. This singing (which includes, in each production, the participation and leadership of master cantors from Armenia) forms the aural atmosphere of this production and it is extraordinary. It drones and soars and beats and rumbles like an ocean.

Against this aural backdrop the actors use their bodies and properties and set pieces to create a series of images in the manner of a lyrical poem. There is very little narrative, other than the vague suggestion of house invasions by marauding gangs of soldiers. Before the performance, and before leading us into the tent like performance space, the company's director, Jaroslaw Fret, spoke directly to the audience to prepare us for what we were to experience. It would be like a series of short poems, he explained. We should be witnesses, he said, and try to collect as many images as we could and organize them, each of us, into our own book of memory. It would be an active engaged process and we should pay close attention. The implication was that we should not be prepared for story, but poem. It was helpful.

Here, I'll share a bit of what I can bring from my "book of memory," after having seen this inspiring work of art: There are pillars, suggesting a temple of some sort. The chanting voices evoke a sense of mystery, importance, profundity. Actors bend and move like trees in a storm. Pages of a book, or perhaps photographic negatives, fly through the air. The temple is repeatedly destroyed and reconstructed. There is a bed that is also a gallows. There are explosions — gunshots? beatings? Some women are stripped of their humanity and crawl about on the floor, grabbing apples with their teeth. The temple pillars are transformed into pyramidal structures suggesting tents (a desert?) or funeral pyres. There is, always, a burning candle. The walls themselves begin to drip what? Sand? Water? Blood?

The images go on and on, accompanied by continuous music of exquisite beauty: drums and voices.

It is the most simple complexity I have ever encountered in the theatre. It is living poetry. It is unlike anything I have ever seen before.

I don't know how to do justice to this. I feel no more equipped to explain this than any other great masterpiece. I think of another great work of art that responded to a massacre: Picasso's "Guernica." For that, too, no critical review can do justice.

Is "Armine, Sister" an accomplishment in a class with "Guernica?" Really?

Yes, it is. It will expand your idea of what theatre can be. It will permanently change you. It is great art.

"Armine, Sister" presented by Teatr ZAR and The San Francisco International Arts Festival in association with Kitka Women's Vocal Ensemble and Golden Thread Productions. Director: Jaroslaw Fret.

Teatr ZAR ensemble: Ditte Berkeley, Przemyslaw Blaszczyk, Kamila Klamut, Aleksandra Kotecka, Magdalena Mądra, Simona Sala, Orest Sharak, Tomasz Wierzbowski.

Armenian Guest Singers and Musicians: Aram Kerovpyan, Vahan Kerovpyan, Murat İçlinalça, Dengbej Kazo, Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat.