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Teatr ZAR | "Armine, Sister" | Battersea Arts Centre, London | October 2014

## "Witnessing after the Witnessing"

Shakeh Major Tchilingirian

"Armine, Sister" continues to equally haunt and soothe me. Weeks have lapsed since I saw the European premiere in London and am trying to make sense of the experience in words. And I am very much aware of being rough and raw much like the physical theatre experience itself.

It took Teatre ZAR three-years of research and artistic, as well as technical discernment to stage "Armine, Sister", which is dedicated to the history of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and their extermination during WWI. Yet, the focus is on the "history of ignorance" of today's Europeans about 1915 and the consequent "accord of silence" after acts of mass violence. Physicality and spacious noise are layered with ancient monophonic songs and liturgical chants.

My first impression is that this is unapologetically—immediately engaging and traumatic— an assault on the visual and aural senses. I can't choose which scene to look at or to avoid— I want to see them all—I don't want to miss anything as there is a desperate need to

make sense of it all. It is as if making sense of it is the only way to remain sane and composed.

I have visions of undeveloped photographic sheets flying around with NO pictures, NO faces, NO names—but, then, these sheets are the only witness and reminder of what has happened.

The shovelling sound with empty buckets against the ground as the sand is collected and poured and thrown, conjures the image of burying people alive.

Then the image of the girl who REPEATEDLY, with great effort of breath and precision of movement, keeps re-enacting, trying to make a "print" of her twisted, tortured naked body on the ground, in the sand beneath her; it keeps haunting me. It is as if the camera can't capture the reality, she HERSELF has to make an imprint of her existence—even THAT she has to do on her own. Where is the dignity in this? Not even a respectful burial even after death....

She then (finally) has to place her red dress and

bury it in sand that again, she HERSELF has to pour over the dress, as if that will be a proof, a testimony to her existence and death — as if it will make it more real. No one else would ever know that she existed, let alone how she died—no respect...

The musical journey, through the songs and chants, waxes and wanes. In the beginning it is a focal point and almost falsely offers a sense of trust and protection, which is shattered very soon. The entire experience is like undulating waves. After a while the continuously persistent LOUD banging and clattering becomes completely normal—you stop hearing it altogether until suddenly it stops. This highly symbolic COMPLETE silence screams even louder.

The expressionless faces of the victims and torturers/ perpetrators highlight the brutality of what they are doing. It dehumanizes both victims and perpetrators. As the "audience", one thinks it will be easier to disengage from being a witness to the atrocities but it works most effectively in quite the opposite way. It highlights the lack of choice of being a witness in the first place and the subsequent choice and responsibility of what to do next having been there.

The experience is almost like watching the events in a loop — there is no beginning and no end. You can almost walk in, observe something and walk out. Seeing it again on another occasion from another "position" on "the other side" of the space I am struck by

what I can only refer to as "acts of mercy" by the women to one another. It is a reminder that even in the depths of depravity and inhuman experience, humanity somehow surges through attempting to restore and remind us that we still care and feel the connection to one another. As the 13th-century Persian poet Sa'adi said: "The sons of Adam are limbs of each other... If you have no sympathy for the troubles of others, you are unworthy to be called by the name of a Human."

I find this experience highly traumatic, yet hugely cathartic. The "actors", apart from having tremendous focus and stamina, convey an enormous depth of emotion and connection to the material they are presenting. I end up wanting more and more because that is the space where I can finally find peace. It is like a soothing prayer—I suddenly felt myself wanting to shout "YES, I am a believer! I have found my "Church"!

The only place to find healing is right in the middle of it all. I want to hug the victims as well as the perpetrators who are also victims. I want to ask WHY? I want to say it will be ok. That this, too, will pass only if we remember that we are HUMAN beings with hearts capable of feeling love and souls that forgive only if there is acknowledgement and recognition of these atrocities.

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