

Gospels of Childhood

November 30, 2007

By Wenzel Jones

Much of the power of this piece lies in its darkness and silences. The audience enters a dark, candlelit space (seating is on the stage) to the sound of chanting that evokes an almost atavistic sense of the spiritual. What follows is an oddly moving, not overly linear, performance that comes in at just under an hour. Each scene is clearly delineated in the program, but because much of the show is in exceedingly foreign languages (Georgian, Svan, etc.), chances of actually following along are slight.

Not that it matters. Each scene unfolds in its own time and may be nothing more than the sight of a woman in a tub washing her legs, or as stylized as dancing--but not so much dancing as women creating an ongoing series of sculptural shapes with their bodies as they cling to and release one another.

The performers, presumably under the direction of project leader Jaroslaw Fret, move fluidly through the shadowy space and maintain a constant sense of the sacred. There is a further sensual aspect of the experience as well. In addition to the scent of candle wax, of which there is a great deal burned during the course of one show, there is a startling moment when wine is thrown on the table and one can almost immediately smell it. Too, the bread that is torn soon thereafter is more than visual (though by that point it may have all been suggestion) and the sense of the sacramental is palpable.

The evening ends with four chandeliers being lit and set in motion, after which the company scampers off in silence. And this is where it's unlike anything I've ever sat through. The audience, perhaps in thrall to the sanctified aura that's left, sits in utter silence, applause seeming too coarse a response. My companion referred to this as "dessert," that quiet time after a religious service during which one sits and reflects. But then, of course, that moment passes, and it's too late to applaud, and the lights stay down, and the company is probably halfway home before somebody takes the initiative and claps anyway. We may have sat there in utter contemplative silence for what felt like a good five minutes.

Presented by UCLA Live and Teatr Zar at the UCLA Freud Playhouse,

Sunset at Hilgard, Westwood.

Tue.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 & 8 p.m., Sun. 2 & 7 p.m. Nov. 27-Dec. 2. (310) 825-2101. www.uclalive.org.