



## Theatre Out of Death

*Dariusz Kosiński*

### Opening

In the center of the room, a platform. The doors and walls that partly surround it on all four sides are covered in scratches. An image is projected onto them, one of those pictures from the Syrian civil war that we have seen so often we almost do not notice them anymore. A boy injured in the bombing, covered in brick dust, bleeding from his forehead, yet—as often noted by Western journalists—he is not crying, not screaming, not calling for help. Two women wearing white dresses are seated on either side of the platform, with a third woman curled up on the stage itself. Once the audience has taken their seats, four men enter the performance space, carrying canisters and luggage. They stand in the darkness by the wall opposite the entrance to the space. They will be present and active throughout, but we will barely be able to see them. The doors and walls set around the platform are now being used as screens to show images from a rescue mission: a boat flying the Greek flag carrying terrified, exhausted women and children. One of them, older than the others, has a look of such absolute despair and helplessness in her eyes that I can hardly bear to look.

In a moment, a performance of *Medee. O przekraczaniu* (Medeas: On Getting Across; 2017) will begin. It is Teatr ZAR's most recent production and only their fifth to date, though the company has been working for more than a decade as part of the Jerzy Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland. It is spring 2017 and I am watching *Medee* for the second time (though I am

*Figure 1. Photography as torture. The perpetrators document the suffering of a raped woman as they force her to turn her face to the camera (Simona Sala). Simona Sala, Alessandro Curti, and Przemysław Błaszczak in Armine, Sister. Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2014. (Photo by Karol Jarek; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)*

certain not for the last) in their Na Grobli Studio, which opened in 2010. I have been close to ZAR for years. It is odd for me to think that this might be the only theatre whose company and works I know this well, having followed them almost from the very start of their activities.

I saw their first production, *Ewangelie dzieciństwa* (Gospels of Childhood; 2004), a dozen or so times over the past seven years (I have not seen any other play as often nor over such a long period). I saw their other plays repeatedly. The fact that for four years (2010–2013) I was research director at the Jerzy Grotowski Institute is irrelevant, because

my decision to attend ZAR's productions had nothing to do with my professional duties, but instead with a very early realization that ZAR was my sort of theatre, the kind that is aligned with my own philosophies. I always take their shows very much to heart.

I have witnessed how the work of the company has been undervalued, their productions attracting critical responses. I see two essential reasons for this: first, negative criticism has been based on simplistic interpretations of the work as “ritualist”; and second, the company is associated with the Jerzy Grotowski institute, and therefore with the Grotowski tradition. Regarding the second point, the decision to fit ZAR into the institute's internal structures has generated tension and numerous accusations, including the envy of those who lack such institutional support and—there's no point denying this—substantial technical, organizational, and budgetary resources. The fact that the institute's director, Jarosław Fret, is also the leader of ZAR invites suspicion and doubts, though the accusers fail to take into consideration that ZAR was already functioning before Fret could have dreamed that one day he would direct an institution which (up until 2006) was called the Center for the Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Theatrical and Cultural Research (led until 2004 by Zbigniew Osiński).

These disputes cast a shadow on ZAR's work. Many circles in Poland treat their work with some reserve because increasingly Grotowski's work and person<sup>1</sup> draw more and more

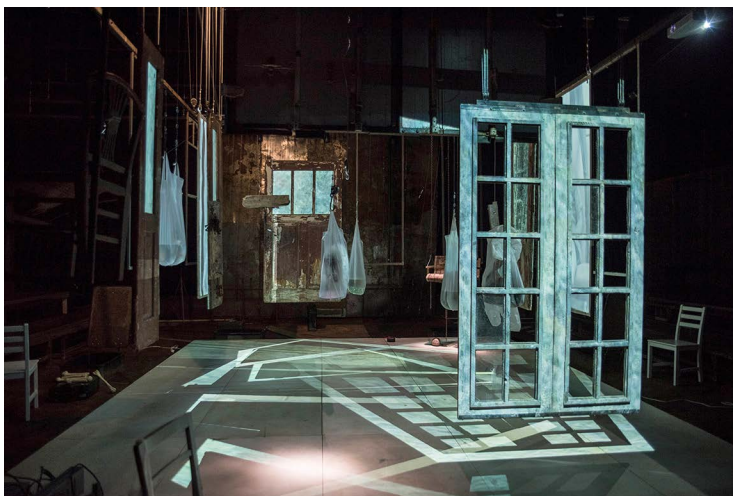


Figure 2. The set for *Medea: On Getting Across* by Jarosław Fret. *Thessaloniki, 2017.* (Photo by Magdalena Mądra; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

1. This criticism needs a deep and multidimensional analysis with more time and space than I can give it here. As a starting point for later research, there are currently four main areas of Polish criticism regarding Grotowski: hidden aspects of his work and life concerning mainly sexuality and “gender troubles” (Butler 1990; see Adamiecka-Sitek 2012; and Niziołek 2013); his relations to the members of the company and accusations of using them as “lab rats” (see esp. the film *The Prince* by Karol Radziszewski [2014], with testimonies of former Laboratory

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criticism. This criticism is rarely based on the kind of clear and valid analysis found in the work of Agata Adamiecka-Sitek (2012) and Grzegorz Niziołek (2013). In most cases the criticism amounts to half-truths repeated in private, along with oversimplifications, gossip, and simple ignorance. Finally, the anti-Grotowski turn is an all-too obvious reaction to many years of almost cult-like adoration. As a result, theatre companies and artists associated with his name must frequently contend with resistance and preconceived ideas about their own work. Much of this happened after 1989 when Poland's social and cultural contexts changed. In this ongoing post-Communist epoch, the questions Teatr Laboratorium posed and the solutions they offered are no longer "approved of." Indeed, the "Grotowski brand" impedes those who are Grotowski's inheritors, including the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, in Pontedera, Italy.

This context is vital to understanding how Teatr ZAR functions. Jarosław Fret's company is not judged solely on the basis of its creative output and achievements. It has to contend with stereotypes and oversimplifications, with being pigeonholed in ways that are inaccurate. The most difficult stereotypes to overcome are the generalizing categories of "ritual theatre" and "sacred theatre," terms often used to describe ZAR's productions. These mischaracterizations are based on ZAR's use of traditional folk songs, many of which come straight from liturgies or have a religious character; its use of religious signs and symbolism; the degree of focus their performances, which consciously employ silence and darkness, demand; and the seriousness and even exaltation and pathos of the group's performances, which are almost automatically interpreted as attempts to create some sort of "spiritual" theatrical ritual or spectacle. In a world dominated by irony, a world in which the model form of performance is stand-up comedy and parody, ZAR's seriousness and focus may seem anachronistic, and "rituality" can seem to be the only explanation. Thinking about their theatre solely in terms of "ritual" is an escapist and interpretative falsehood, making it impossible to correctly evaluate ZAR's work.

## Emergent Theatre

Any future historian studying Polish theatre of the 21st century who looks at Teatr ZAR and other companies working in a similar fashion will have to abandon habits developed while analyzing institutionalized theatres that were founded within set frameworks according to set rules and goals, and having fixed elements such as the date of their founding. In the case of ZAR, things are different. Before there was any such thing as a company, there were Kamila Klamut and Jarosław Fret. These two young people were connected with the Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Theatrical and Cultural Research in Wrocław, where they worked as members of the technical and organizational staff. At the same time (as it still is today with many of the Grotowski Institute employees) they were developing their own artistic research. They were interested in early Christian traditions: gnostic belief systems and rituals, and songs and traditions preserved in enclaves far from big cities. To foster these interests the two started an arts and research project focused on music and anthropology. This practice, of course, has its own traditions—in Poland coming from the work of Włodzimierz Staniewski and Jerzy Grotowski (in that order). From the very start, the theatre set up by Fret and Klamut tried to find answers by creatively referencing Staniewski's and Grotowski's research, operating within a common space the two had created while at the same time carving out their own territory. As with Staniewski, from the founding of The Centre for Theatre Practices "Gardzienice" in the late 1970s<sup>2</sup> through the first years of the 21st century, and as with Grotowski, as part of

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Theatre actress Teresa Nawrot); his relations with the Communist party and government; and the "mystical," ritualistic dimension of his art and research. Most of these subjects have not yet been researched enough, especially in Poland, so there is still the shadow of "hidden truth" falling on the figure of the Grotowski.

2. See the chapter "Expeditions" in *The Hidden Territories* (Staniewski with Hodge 2004:39–51).

his Teatr Źródeł (Theatre of Sources),<sup>3</sup> Fret and Klamut as early as 1999 wanted to discover neglected Christian traditions reaching as far back as the first centuries after Christ's death. They worked not only by studying texts, but also by visiting places where those traditions were still practiced. Unlike their predecessors, Teatr ZAR to this day continues with these journeys of discovery; in the process of preparing subsequent productions, Fret and his troupe have often set off on long trips, the fruits of which can later be seen and heard onstage.

Early in the 21st century these excursions took them to the borders of Europe and Asia, to gnostic enclaves of the Mandaeans in Iran, to monasteries on Mount Athos, to Armenia and especially Georgia, where thanks to Eptime Pilpani, a singer from the Svaneti highland regions, first Fret then other members of his company learned remarkable polyphonic singing styles. In 2002, the name of one type of song provided Fret's theatre with its name. *Zar* in Georgian means "bell," but it also refers to a type of song with a very specific construction and incredible tonal quality performed during burial ceremonies. The ritual function of the *zar* is to support the soul of the deceased as it sets off on its journey into the afterworld. Adopting this name was of course a clear, persistent signifier of the tradition Fret continues to refer to and the theatre he wants to create: drawn from archaic religious sources, this music is a persistent element of the company's art. But in adopting the ZAR moniker, Fret also indicated that the theatre would remain in direct relation to death and its transcendence, resisting the processes of forgetting and focusing more on the unique experiences of individuals rather than on conventionally constructed collectives such as "nation" and "society." This is also mirrored in the international character of the company. From the very beginning Teatr ZAR welcomed not only Polish members to the group but also others they met on tours or through workshops the company conducted, some of whom later came to Poland to work with ZAR (for example Ditte Berkeley and Nini Julia Bang). Others (especially in recent years) were invited by Fret to work with him (including Matej Matejka and Simona Sala).

The ZAR team continues to go on journeys, conduct research, run workshops, publish accounts of its activities, and engage in many other cultural and educational projects. What role do stage performances play in their work? Do the experiences and knowledge accumulated by company members substantially exceed what they are able to share with ordinary audiences? Performances are one way they can share their work, a window on their world, a product that imposes discipline, rhythm, and drama, keeping everything in check. But however important, ZAR's public performances are not the basis for judging the company's work. ZAR belongs to a group of companies that function in a field that might best be called "theatre-culture" (Barba 1999:175–93). This field is as far as it can be from the world of theatre productions—thanks to different forms of support the company's income is not based solely on income from public performances. In the spirit of the Polish and European cultural tradition that developed in the 20th century, ZAR, with its varied and long-term community activities, is closer to a research center than a theatre production company. The group does not divide its activities into "artistic," "preparatory research," and "administrative"; nor do they prioritize artistic performance over everything else. Thinking about ZAR solely as theatre limits and diminishes its mission.

However, ZAR's performances do indeed stand on their own, although a survey of their publicly presented work raises questions: works are sometimes presented over time under the same title but differ greatly. This can be seen clearly in ZAR's first production staged between 2002 and 2008, *Ewangelie dzieciństwa. Fragmenty o przeczuciach nieśmiertelności ze wspomnień wczesnego dzieciństwa* (Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood), echoing William Wordsworth's ode.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, as more

3. Basic information on the project can be found in *The Grotowski Sourcebook* edited by Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner ([1997] 2001:207–82) and in Kosiński (2009:272–303).

productions were created—*Cesarskie cienie. Próby o samobójstwie* (Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide; 2007); *Anhelli. Wołanie* (Anhelli: The Calling; 2009)—the productions were combined into a triptych under the name of the company’s first work. That first production, very much shortened and restructured, became part of a new composition renamed *Uwertura* (Overture; 2010). How, therefore, should we define this work’s identity? And this is not the only problem. The original *Gospels of Childhood* was staged in a variety of ways, each different from one another in key aspects. Before 2005, the production was staged mainly in the Grotowski Institute’s forest venue near the village of Brzezinka, 30 kilometers from Wrocław. After that, it was moved to the old auditorium of the Teatr Laboratorium in the center of Wrocław. For a while the production featured Daisuke Yoshimoto, a butoh dancer who played the role of Lazarus.

When I first saw *Gospels of Childhood* performed on 10 October 2002 during Gardzienice’s 25th anniversary celebration, I noticed the words “work in progress” on the poster next to the show’s title. In fact, these words should really accompany all of Teatr ZAR’s productions. They go through so many key changes, it is really impossible to indicate a point at which they could be thought of as “finished.” I have seen them all numerous times, not only in various places (ZAR is a wandering theatre, frequently putting on guest performances internationally<sup>5</sup>) and with a range of different performers, but also with scenes arranged in different sequences—some vanishing, others added. This sort of approach introduces a problem related to one of the most fundamental assumptions in theatre criticism: that there is a finished object of study. This ignores the possibility for a performance to be unrepeatable—singular acts of staging that function as a set and deserve to be precisely and strictly named a performance. This makes it hard to describe and analyze ZAR’s productions, yet it is also the source of the theatre’s power: each performance is a unique experience.

## Premonitions, Attempts, Cries

*Gospels of Childhood* refers simultaneously to fascinations with noncanonical Christian traditions (“The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” apocrypha about Jesus’s early life, popular in the Middle Ages) and to the childhood years of the artists, emphasized by the subtitle *Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. It was a highly appropriate title for ZAR’s debut production.

I have already written in some detail about *Gospels of Childhood* (Kosiński 2008) as a production that was for me an initiation into ZAR’s work. Despite subsequent changes to the piece, it will always be associated with their forest base in Brzezinka, where Grotowski and the members of the Teatr Laboratorium ran their paratheatrical explorations. There, in old farmyard buildings abandoned after WWII and partly restored by the Laboratorium, Special Project events took place (Kosiński 2009; Kumiega 1987), followed by Theatre of Sources seminars. ZAR audiences rode to Brzezinka from Wrocław in a chartered bus, providing an experience very different from the usual evening out at a city-based theatre. It was—whether we liked it or not—a unique journey into the past, to a place that had an almost mythical status, now “recovered” and filled with projects created by a young generation of artists.

I believe this mythical past was reflected at the start of each performance. When the audience enters the spacious performance hall, called the Nursery in Grotowski’s day, they find the actors already there, apparently cleaning up after some important, maybe even sacred event,

4. William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” also known as the “Immortality Ode” and the “Great Ode,” was completed in 1804 and first published in 1807. Apart from its title, however, the ZAR production seems to have no direct connection with the Wordsworth ode.

5. It is hard to list all the places where ZAR has performed. Let me just name the most important ones: Fabbri Europa Festival in Florence (2007); Barbican Centre, London (2009); Los Angeles (2009); San Francisco International Arts Festival (2011); Edinburgh Festival (2012); Cena Brasil Internacional, Rio de Janeiro (2014); Theatre Olympics in Beijing (2014) and New Delhi (2018); Tehran (2015); and Bouffes du Nord, Paris (2018).

something that had taken place and been completed. They are scraping off candle wax, putting equipment away, mopping the floorboards. This section was called “Always Late” and resonated with my generation’s experience of people who had been born too late to engage with hopes felt in the 1960s and 1970s, who then grew up in the shadowy 1980s, married in Poland by the trauma imposed on the people during the martial law period (1981–1983).

This introductory sequence ends with a pieta: a young woman reaches with outstretched arms, holding a white tablecloth as if it held a dead body or were a shroud. After a moment of darkness, a series of actions unfolds, related to the evangelical tale of Lazarus and his sisters Maria and Martha. Some apocryphal excerpts are woven into the sequence, as are some relating to Ivan from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: someone sharing in the joy of resurrection, recited by the lead male performer (Przemysław Błaszczyk) as if unable to believe in his own incarnation as Lazarus. Subsequent sequences are built of short scenes: moving images, extracted from the darkness with lighting and singing. These feature three female performers. Two (Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut) are in simple red dresses, both listed in the program as Maria/Martha; the third (Aleksandra Kotecka), nameless, wears a navy blue dress as a counterpoint to the twin sisters—hence, I decided to call this character the Third Woman.

The rather oneiric sequences that follow seem exactly what is promised in the title: fragments of premonitions from childhood. The various scenes we are presented with are accompanied by a calm, almost contemplative song. This puts a certain distance between the performance and the audience/listeners, the distance that separates us from what we remember, even the most vivid and dramatic memories, separated as we are by time and the awareness of how everything has since changed.

Gradually, from a series of images, we see the emergence of evangelical motifs arranged in a way that seems to merge death and Lazarus’s rebirth, along with the suffering and resurrection of Christ, despair, and hope. What really does force itself to the foreground is the overwhelming closeness and realness of death, which the sisters also seem to experience. The uncertainty of resurrection, which leads to both hope and doubt, is also in the songs; some that are from Georgia and Greece and are connected with resurrection are beautiful but alien to Polish ears. Meanwhile, other songs dealing with death are Polish funeral compositions, including one traditionally intoned over open graves during every Catholic funeral: “Come from heaven to the sound of our prayers / Residents of glory, all Saints of God.”

This dramatic contrast culminates in the closing scenes, which remain for me among the most powerful moments of theatre I have ever experienced. Though I have described them in the past (see Kosiński 2008), I will allow myself to go over it once more. The chorus intones “Kyrie eleison” from the Sioni monastery in Tbilisi. Three women sit at a table, sharing bread they tear from a loaf. Maria/Martha (Ditte Berkeley) opens a copy of the Bible and in a



Figure 3. *Martha/Maria* (Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut) in *Overture, 1st part of the triptych Gospels of Childhood*. Teatr ZAR, Laboratorium Room, Wrocław, 2006. (Photo by Tom Dombrowski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)





faltering voice reads in English a sequence from the Gospel of St. John about the illness and death of Lazarus. She halts on the pitiful words uttered by Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” which, when repeated by both sisters, are transformed into a loud lament, rising to a very high pitch then suddenly cut off.

This zar, a Svaneti funeral song that Fret often said was like a procession of ghosts or a staircase the soul must ascend, resounds in complete darkness. There is nothing to see — only the song, experienced in the here and now.

When the zar ends, in the darkness we hear something knocking, then a shovel hitting the ground, and the low sounds of a tubular bell. Fret leads the chorus, intoning the first verses of “Megisistis Pascha,” an Easter song from the Greek Orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos. Set against the music, from the darkness emerges the sound of a man reciting the beginning of the gnostic “Hymn about a Pearl”: “When I was a child in my father’s house, in the Kingdom...” Slowly, candles are lit. The chorus begins to sing the Easter liturgy of the Resurrection. The Maria/Marthas lower wood wheels sus-

Figure 4. The final scene of *Caesarean Section*, the second part of *Gospels of Childhood*. Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut. Teatr ZAR, Laboratorium Room, Wrocław, 2010. (Photo by Łukasz Giza; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

pended from the ceiling parallel to the floor, and light a series of slim Orthodox church candles mounted on the wheels. The hymn slowly fills the space, amplified by tubular bells, while light rises across the stage. The sound and the light pronounce: *Christos anesti*, Christ has risen. This is confirmed by images: an opened grave and canvas sheets that the women spread on the ground. In the finale, voices once again rise and the hymn crescendos, growing more pronounced up to the point of culmination. The last sound is that of someone hitting the largest bell. Before its reverberation fades, all the actors exit. Only we, the audience, are left in the brightly lit, suddenly silent space.

The scene set in darkness was called “Jesus’s Lament” relating directly to his death, conforming to evangelical history and the Christian liturgical sequence, coming before the Easter joy of the Resurrection. The Resurrection itself (as in the canonical Gospels) did not feature in the performance. Instead, we heard the song of announcement and noticed some signs—an empty grave and shrouds spread out before us, forming something like an

installation reminiscent of the empty Lord's grave, staged in Polish churches during Easter. Yet in my profound, oft-repeated experience, this scene in darkness, though filled with the mournful zar, allowed us to experience something akin to a transcendence of death. I emphasize that I am talking about my personal experience. *Gospels of Childhood* did not impose on the audience any sorts of solutions, instead presenting sounds, images, and dramatic spaces for individual experience.

The next ZAR production, *Caesarean Section*, was deeply connected with its title. First shown in June 2007 (the official premiere was in December 2007), *Caesarean Section* was a cold blade cutting the pregnant silence that followed *Gospels*. It also introduced a shockingly divergent scenic language, drawing from contemporary dance and performance art.

Inspired by the prose of Romanian Aglaja Veteranyi and ideas expressed by Albert Camus, *Caesarean Section* was subtitled *Essays on Suicide*. Its visual frame of reference was a narrow channel cutting across the stage space, a gap in the floor filled with broken glass. On the show's posters, this same fissure appeared as a blue line across the icon of the Holy Trinity painted by Andrei Rublev. The production was made up of a series of performative actions delivered by the sisters/rivals already met in *Gospels of Childhood* (Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut) and a young man (Slovakian actor Matej Matejka, who had just joined the company), supported by three female singers (Nini Julia Bang, Aleksandra Kotecka, and Ewa Pasikowska) who also played violin and cello, and a piano-playing singer (Tomasz Bojarski). The production consisted of a series of scenes developed from improvisations around the central theme of suicide, as the subtitle suggests, and also the struggle for life itself in the face of the overwhelming reality of death.

This series of scenes reminded me of a recurring dream: something trying to express itself, to put itself in order, despite being threatened



Figure 5. Poster for *Caesarean Section*. (Design by Bartosz Radziszewski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)



by an annihilating power. All the actions came across as attempts to reach something that kept evading the performers, and us. This struggle was written into the aesthetics of the physical interactions onstage, which moved from the fluidity of dance to sudden, apparently uncontrolled, free-flowing movements.

*Caesarean Section*'s final sequence was a unique synthesis of aesthetics and drama. After a dynamic, entertaining scene full of ironic jokes on the theme of suicide, played in the slapstick style of silent movies, actors move wooden chairs to center stage, knocking some over to create something of a pyre. Berkeley grabs Klamut by the hand and forces her to run. After a while, Matejka takes over. Klamut undresses mid-run. All she is left wearing is her underwear and tights. She also tries to take those off, but she's only able to remove the tights from one leg. Matejka grabs the dangling garment and turns it into a tether reigning in the running woman. The stretched tights catch on the chairs, overturning them. In spite of this, Klamut keeps running until she is out of strength. Eventually she collapses, breathing heavily. This scene with its use of real and risky physical actions, the exhaustion of the performer's body, recalls the strategies of 1970s performance art, contrasting strongly with the earlier symbolical and more contemplative scenes.

Berkeley tries to hand Klamut a glass of wine, but it spills over her face and hair. The singers, thus far seated at the edge of the performance space, approach both women. They sit on chairs, placing their glasses of wine on the floor. We hear the "Kyrie eleison" brought by the company from Corsica, somewhat rearranged by Fret. Singing, they knock over the glasses and the red wine spills onto the floor. After a moment, they upright the empty glasses, then knock them over again. The hymn fills the space, stopping the action for a long period of—contemplation? lament? prayer?

At this point, Klamut, dressed in a long white shirt, withdraws to the side of the stage and stands with her back to it. She lifts a hand in the air and from her clenched fist drops small objects that clang to the floor. The "Kyrie" and Berkeley's lament end, replaced by Erik Satie's piano piece *Gnossienne I*: frozen drops of sound, falling like shards of glass. The chorus withdraws to the semi-dark side of the stage. Klamut takes out a bag of oranges and spills them on the floor, then suddenly collapses. The fruit rolls about in the light and with the music creates an unexpected warm mood. Berkeley sits next to Klamut and, using her legs, tries to put a plastic bag over the top of her head. Finally, she falls across her partner's knees—Klamut then mouths a silent scream. Light then focuses on the crevice in the floor. In the darkness that has descended across the stage, that is all we see. The last image, the last note: a cut.

The first time I attended *Caesarean Section*, I was struck by the difference in terms of aesthetics, music, and acting from *Gospels of Childhood*. This move away from the post-Grotowski theatre of the physical and symbolic, replaced by techniques from dance theatre,<sup>6</sup> appeared to be a clear declaration by ZAR that the company would use the possibilities offered by contemporary theatre without being locked into a formula. When I watched *Caesarean Section* the second time in Spring 2008, I noticed more connections with *Gospels*, which would soon lead to these productions being combined in a theatrical triptych.

The most important theme linking the two pieces is death. While the "childlike" *Gospels* referred to the naive and at the same time sacred possibility of transcending and defeating death, the more "grown up" *Caesarean Section* was a war dance against surrendering to relentless death. These "essays on suicide" asked not just about causes, that is, things that stop us from living, but also about that which indicates we don't always escape into death. While in *Gospels* the energy directed against death was a mystery experienced through the intercession of song,

6. The physical language of the performance was developed on the basis of Matejka's work with the Czech company Farma v jeskyni (Farm in the Cave) and influenced by the dance theatre of Pina Bausch and the DV8 Physical Theatre of Lloyd Newson. Some elements of Kamila Klamut's performance were also inspired by her previous work with butoh dancers, especially Daisuke Yashimoto.

in *Caesarean Section*, life is the mystery, seen as a series of actions confounding the overwhelming ease with which we can kill ourselves. Different suicide attempts performed almost parodically by the actors, physical actions (especially Klamut's) staging clashes between them, force us to confront the mystery of life leading not towards but away from death. The musical environment occupied by this life is first the prayerful "Kyrie eleison," then the Satie: essence stripped of everything accidental, pure being-in-sound, movement at rest. With *Caesarean Section*, it became ever clearer that ZAR's objective was to guide audiences to a confrontation with death, finding ways to experience it. However irrational it seems, the experience of the state of death as being outside of life and being able to observe it from a distance is a basic experience of theatre, developed in the Polish theatre tradition during the Romantic era, and continuing in the 20th century, especially by Tadeusz Kantor in his Theatre of Death (see Kosiński 2019:121–32).

This interpretation was confirmed by the next ZAR show, *Anhelli: The Calling* (September 2009). "Anhelli" (1837) is the title of a poem by Juliusz Słowacki, a remarkable playwright almost completely unknown outside Poland. Fret's decision to engage with Słowacki's writing was apt because the playwright, who died when he was 40, had throughout his artistic life used his works for stage and in verse to deal with his own feelings about death and to offer Poles a collective experience of loss (he wrote during the period when Poland had lost its independence). Like ZAR, Słowacki often tackled the theme of rebirth and resurrection, and towards the end of his life created an original "Genesian" philosophy, combining Christianity with belief in the transmigration of souls, or rather of selected spirits. "Anhelli" is a poem from his middle period, initiating his later mystical works. He wrote "Anhelli" in a Lebanese monastery, after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Its main and title figure is a young Polish patriot and poet exiled to Siberia where he experiences a process of spiritual transformation led by a shaman. Some signals in the text suggest that Anhelli is a personification of a powerful spirit (thus his name resembles the Latin *angelus*, angel)—maybe the spiritual leader or a metaphorical impersonation of the whole nation. The process of his transformation is not finished because the hero dies of spiritual suffering, but there are suggestions that in the next life the spirit of Anhelli will gain his full power.

As might be expected, ZAR's *Anhelli: The Calling* was not a staging of the poem. The production featured only very short excerpts chosen by Fret—though Słowacki scholars found surprising visual allusions to the poem (Świątkowska 2010). The performance was framed as a clearly defined visual metaphor: over a rectangular wooden stage platform, the set designers suspended a giant sheet of fabric, which at the start took the form of a sail, then became the heavy, lead-toned sky over Anhelli's journeys, to be illuminated by lightning effects in later sections



Figure 6. *Fighting with the Heavens. Matej Matejka (Anhelli) in Anhelli: The Calling, the third part of Gospels of Childhood. Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2010. (Photo by Irena Lipińska; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)*

7. A certain misunderstanding entered the interpretation of the triptych *Gospels of Childhood*, written by Maria Shevtsova (2013), which contained biographical information about Słowacki and the central character of his poem. Despite what Shevtsova writes, Anhelli doesn't take a trip to the Holy Land but is a Pole exiled to Siberia.

of the play and tugged at by sea storms (simulated by actors striking the fabric with long poles), then finally turning into a burial shroud.

This was the first time Fret used scenic metaphor so explicitly and also the first time ZAR's dramaturgy was based on the composition of individual lines of both physical and musical actions developed by individual actors and then linked to create the dense web of more general meaning enacted by the ensemble. In the broader context of such complex webs of interpretation, four characters were familiar from previous productions: two women (Kamila Klamut and Ditte Berkeley) and two men, the Knight/Shaman (Przemysław Błaszczak) and AnHELLi (Matej Matejka). The Knight/Shaman behaves in a way reminiscent of *Gospels of Childhood*, enriched now by the experiences from the years of work on the earlier performance. Similarly, Matej Matejka continues and develops work recognizable from *Caesarean Section*, work he had long explored as part of his own practice and training.<sup>8</sup> Matejka, in the role of the title character AnHELLi, also developed the role of someone fighting to save the life he performed in *Caesarean*

*Section*. The difference in *AnHELLi* is that this struggle represents both a refusal to surrender to death and the struggle to conquer limitations imposed by it and by life. In this fight AnHELLi (Matejka) is accompanied by two women. The first seems to connect him with the earth through love and motherhood, a theme very much present in the performances when Ditte Berkeley, who played the role and was Matejka's partner in private life, was visibly pregnant. The second woman (Klamut), directly referred to as Angel, calls him to cut ties with the earth, to take flight.

This arrangement, by and large inspired by Słowacki's poem in which the "angelically" named protagonist is accompanied by two female characters, was at times played against the romantic stereotypes, its "mystical" connotations treated rather tongue-in-cheek. To some degree, this was determined by the casting. The slim, petite blonde with a glowing complexion played an earthly lover and the actress with sharp facial features and a muscular build



Figure 7. *Guarding Angel*. Kamila Klamut (*Angel*) and Matej Matejka (*AnHELLi*) in *AnHELLi: The Calling, the third part of Gospels of Childhood*. Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2010. (Photo by Irena Lipińska; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

8. Soon after the premiere of *AnHELLi*, Matej Matejka set up his studio attached to the Grotowski Institute, focusing on its own artistic explorations and workshops ([www.studiomatejka.com](http://www.studiomatejka.com)).

played the Angel. Irony and self-ridicule utilized by Klamut reached a culmination when her Angel, with the practiced gestures of a village housewife, plucked feathers from an angelic wing in order to sprinkle them, in a symbolic gesture, over Anhell's body.

The topic of death and resurrection was played out in another clearly defined, truly memorable finale representative of ZAR performances. Five male performers lie scattered about an empty stage wearing only trousers. Suddenly they start to scratch at the floorboards with desperate and violent movements. First one then another manages to pull up some boards. Underneath are recessed rectangular angles of earth—graves into which, one by one, they lay down to die. The only exception is Anhell, who tears at the floorboards without success. Impulsively, contorting his body, he throws himself about the now empty stage. There is no grave for him. He fails to find that one bit of earth where he could have eternal (?) rest. In the end, he comes to a standstill on the stage floor. The fabric ceiling slowly descends, creating a shroud for all the bodies. The song that has been accompanying the scene also dies down. In the silence, we see light coming in through windows on the side of the Na Grobli Studio building. A new day is dawning, perhaps the one those lying beneath the shroud were waiting for, intending to rise from their graves according to the vision Słowacki wrote in his poem that begins with the words “And Anhell rose from the grave along with all the other ghosts...” ([1845–1849?] 1959:248).

During the first few performances, the hope awakened by the light seemed undermined by a surprising element: a crow, kept in a cage, hitting the bars with its beak and wings. Later, Fret stopped using the bird because of the demands and restrictions of using a live animal. Because of that the bird of death—and the traditional symbol of a trapped soul—accidentally vanished from the finale—leaving only the pale light of dawn.

## Emergent Dramaturgy

After the first few *Anbelli* performances, Fret decided that all three productions, somewhat rewritten and shortened (especially the first production), would be played together, one after the other on one evening, or a sequence of evenings, creating the theatrical triptych, *Gospels of Childhood*. This unintended configuration emerged after a decade of performances, when Fret realized that despite all the differences he had tried to emphasize in the separate productions, the three tackle and develop the same themes.

The triptych took on both the title and subtitle of the first ZAR production: *Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. The press packet released by the company stated that the subtitle indicated “a uniqueness of a new form of presentation, perceived as a fragment, a sketch, an essay” (ZAR n.d.). This is not just a way of defining the triptych, but also a way of naming the genre the group is working in, accentuating incompleteness—the overall production comprises fragments. But “fragments” does not mean



Figure 8. The final scene of *Anbelli: The Calling*, the third part of *Gospels of Childhood*. Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2010. (Photo by Maciej Zakrzewski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

a lack of unity. It refers to how the triptych is received by spectators. The subtitle alerts them that they should be open to experiencing an encounter with images and intimations, not clearly defined narrative. Both concepts in the subtitle—fragments and recollections—call on audiences to enhance the performances with their own experiences.

In this sense, ZAR is not a “ritualistic” theatre. Its creators do not construct a path leading to a transformative experience. They do use tools from liturgical and religious traditions that are connected to this type of experience, but do not attempt to impose any singular structure on the audience. From this perspective, the essence of ZAR’s work is neither about communicating some set of “sacred” meanings and values, nor creating a quasi-ritualistic atmosphere onstage or a cult-like response in the audience (as with the “total act” and “holy actor” of Grotowski and Cieślak in *The Constant Prince*); it is rather about building a space of possible experiences, creating opportunities, so that the eventual conclusion—something the play will become—belongs to the audience, an audience of witnesses.

In Polish, there is a strong connection between the words “witness” and “experience” that is impossible to convey in English. The English “experience” has its roots in Latin, while the Polish equivalent, *doświadczenie*, indicates what one should do with something that one has lived through. Literally, “to be witnessed,” its meaning and importance are focused on the *future* and challenge us to give testimony. In the full sense of the Polish word, “experience” is thus an event, our experience of it, and our testimony of it, which thus in some way engages and positions the witness with its performative power.

This witnessing process develops along with the performance and is reinforced, or may even be generated, by ZAR’s unique dramaturgy, which I term “emergent.” This is not the dramaturgy of linear action or paratitual transformation, as framed by Arnold van Gennep in his “rites of passage” ([1909] 1960) and then developed by Victor Turner into influential theories of ritual process (1969) and social drama (1974), but is instead a dramaturgy of gradual enlightenment, of stripping away and revealing. From a confusing web of initial scenes often played out simultaneously, their themes presented in a variety of tonalities, we see the fashioning of the central motif, which then takes on a much fuller though not always crystal clear dramaturgical shape by the end—and all amplified by the music. On first viewing, this dramaturgy resonated unfailingly within me as a process of transformation from initial confusion, distraction, a visual divergence in the literal sense that tried to grasp and connect simultaneous poetic actions onstage through gradual engagement in the building of connections between them, right up to the final scene—the only one I would usually recall after a single viewing.

It is only from the perspective of these visual and sonic culminations that it becomes possible to understand earlier sequences, which usually are hard to grasp on their own. With ZAR, you need the end to understand the beginning and middle. Even more, as I have attempted to show, understanding these key culminating scenes is what the viewer does, bringing to bear her or his personal predispositions, experiences, sensitivities, and so on. The emergent dramaturgy of the performance never really reveals itself as a singular thing. If it does eventually expose its meaning, this is only possible thanks to the work of the spectators who construct their own meanings. This means that any discussion of ZAR productions (from the perspective of critics as well as researchers) is ultimately only testimony, not an “objective” settled meaning, value, etc.

When discussing the dramaturgy of emergence, of course, I have no intention of dismissing frequently formulated interpretations emphasizing the musicality of ZAR productions, unique sonic environments experienced through hearing rather than seeing. Indeed, when it comes to ZAR’s productions, terms such as “show” are too narrow, confining us to what is seen, not what is heard. From the perspective of productions after *Gospels of Childhood*, the sonic layer seems to change function within the holistic structure of their performances, as has been described by Shevtsova (2013) and Tatinge Nascimento (2008).



This dramaturgy of emergence is strengthened by the fluid status of the scenic figures, not identical to the physically present actors but seemingly “hooked” onto them, appearing and vanishing, sometimes shifting between one body and another. In the case of Teatr ZAR, this causes particularly acute misunderstandings, as neither the figure of a protagonist nor an actor playing that role are fixed. The same actor may not only adopt a number of personalities over the course of one play, but in certain moments she or he may perform onstage without playing any character at all, being a unique “operator” working some element of stage design, helping a partner complete a task, or simply clearing the stage of unneeded props or materials left from previous scenes. Such a practice is well known in many theatre traditions (especially developed in Japanese traditional theatre genres like *noh* or *kabuki*), but here it is used as a part of a role: an actress performing a character in certain moments functions for a while as the “operator” without abandoning her character entirely. In the finales of ZAR performances, from such a Proteus-like figure, forever changing, a culminating image emerges, demanding that we somehow see all its previous metamorphoses from the point of view of the final (retro) perspective. This is especially true in *Armine, Sister* (2013).

## Armine, Sister

After work had been completed on the final part of the *Gospels of Childhood* triptych, Fret began a new stage in his work. This was initially connected with Armenia, a place that had long fascinated him, with its enduring culture and tradition of monodic religious song. Yet—and this element was new and had deep impact—he was still attempting to address the controversial, politically loaded theme of the genocide of Armenians carried out in Anatolia by the Ottoman Turkish authorities from 1915 to the early 1920s. The extermination of up to 1.5 million Armenians was the first such planned and organized government action in modern Europe. According to Raphael (Rafał) Lemkin,<sup>9</sup> the Jewish Polish lawyer who coined the term “genocide,” the Nazis used the Armenian genocide as a template for the Shoah (see Lemkin 2008). These historical connections between the extermination of Armenians and the largest Holocaust in the history of Europe steered ZAR away from building their piece around musical and cultural materials, focusing instead on the collective lack of memory that allows for such atrocities to continue to this day in Syria, Lebanon, parts of Africa, Thailand, and elsewhere.

Taking up such a theme, especially on the centennial of the Armenian genocide commemorated in 2015,<sup>10</sup> led ZAR to develop activities beyond their stage performance. As mentioned above, Teatr ZAR’s earlier activities included numerous nontheatrical events and projects; with the *Armine, Sister* project, the number and importance of these increased. Discussions, conferences, exhibitions, concerts, performative actions (such as the street performance *Witness* by Daisuke Yoshimoto), flash mobs, and film projects combined to create a rich tapestry of initiatives.<sup>11</sup> While the initial aim was to remind people about the Armenian genocide (especially important in Poland, where public awareness of this historical event is faint), the initiatives

9. Raphael (Rafał) Lemkin (1900–1959) was a Jewish Polish lawyer who studied law at the universities in Krakow and Lwow and in the 1930s worked as a prosecutor and advocate in Warsaw. After the German and Russian invasions, he fled through Lithuania to Sweden and then to the United States. During and soon after World War II he coined the word “genocide” and coauthored the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). He was the advisor to the American prosecutor during the Nuremberg war crimes trial, lectured at Yale Law School (1948–1951), and in 1955 became a professor of law at Rutgers University. For more details see Redzik (2017).

10. The centennial was commemorated by a series of events coordinated by a special Armenian state commission founded in 2013. Activities held in Armenia and in Armenian communities around the world included special religious services, the opening of the Armenian Genocide Museums, and turning off the lights on the Eiffel Tower in Paris and Coliseum in Rome.

11. For more details see the project website: <http://www.teatrzar.art.pl/en/armine-sister>.

also reflected on themes of memory and its politics. All these events took place under the shared banner “Witness Action” and were initiated and supported financially by ZAR and the Grotowski Institute.

The theatrical center of these activities, *Armine, Sister*, was first staged on 28 November 2013. In terms of aesthetics and scenic shape, there was a lot that was new and surprising to ZAR’s existing audience. To put it succinctly: music and song are not at the center of the performance. Song and music are very important in *Armine, Sister*, but these are balanced with a new dramaturgy of space and materials. Earlier ZAR productions were constructed with awareness of space and the objects located within it, but only in *Armine, Sister* did the theatricality of composed space and the metamorphoses of certain objects take on such great importance. During the show, the space is transformed by the performers who function at times as technicians and stage crew.

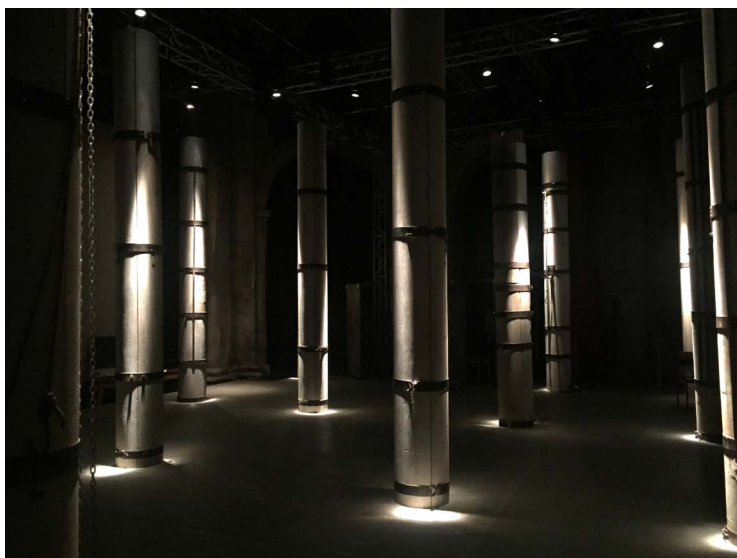


Figure 9. *The columns. The set for Armine, Sister (architecture of the performance designed by Jarosław Fret). Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2017. (Photo by Karol Jarek; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)*

The most important and visually dominant component of the stage design are tall, heavy columns of wood, closely arranged at first in four rows. Each pillar is halved lengthwise and bound together with about a half dozen dark metal rings. Their presence irritates the spectators because it blocks the stage: there are so many columns and they are so large that no one can get a clear view of everything onstage. This is disappointing because a lot is going on all the time. The ensemble of eight actors—four women and four men with both their own individualized roles to play and group sequences—are never onstage together. Simultaneous micro-scenes take place between columns; it’s confusing, especially in the first 10 minutes

or so, because no one knows where to look. Should a spectator make the futile attempt to see everything? Or focus on one sequence at a time? Or follow the activities of one character? But which one? At the beginning there is no clear narrative or progression to guide spectators.

Through most of the performance, the male performers, led by the huge Przemysław Błaszczyk, act as aggressors towards the female performers. Yet in another scene, Błaszczyk takes on the pose of a suffering victim, while the other three men, in one of the most beautiful sequences made by ZAR, take up positions in the center of a ruined temple to pray, singing an Armenian religious hymn. In keeping with ZAR’s strategy of shifting roles among the actors, one actor may be both aggressor and victim.

Throughout the performance the men reshape the space by gradually moving, breaking apart, and removing the massive columns—physically challenging work demanding great focus because the columns are tall, heavy, and very close to the audience. In the performance space of the Na Grobli Studio in Wrocław, where I attended *Armine, Sister* the first several times, the physical threat hanging over the audience was palpable. The performers had to very carefully unhook the steel rings binding the two halves of each column together, lower the two pieces

to the ground, and then move them out of the way. This happens in phases and in a specific rhythm with an accompaniment of singing and commands shouted by the working men. First, some columns are maneuvered to form a central double row; next, the remaining four centrally placed columns are arranged in a way that (as the public is informed by Fret's comments and visual materials accompanying the performance) resembles a typical square-shaped Armenian temple. After the iron rings binding the columns are broken open, sand pours from inside of these four. Similar gaps are opened in the four columns set closer to the four corners of the stage, spilling their sand more slowly almost until the end of the performance. The next phase is the dismantling of three of the centrally placed columns, creating three sets of wood beams propped up vertically and leaning in to touch each other at the top. The arrangement is like the gallows used to execute Armenians during the genocide. Finally, all columns are taken apart and the fourth (thrown onto the stage earlier) is opened. Slim half-meter wood panels are extracted, resembling vertical gravestones.

I describe these actions in detail because they are one of the more obvious dramaturgical lines in *Armine, Sister*. During the production, the performers transform the space from a temple to a ruin then to a flat empty sand-covered desert (where so many Armenians perished), and finally an abandoned cemetery. We witness the creation of a theatre of spatial installation that at its heart is not about characters or even performers, but about physical actions that transform the artistically arranged space. Poland has a rich history of this kind of theatre, including the work of Tadeusz Kantor, Józef Szajna, and Leszek Mądzik.

A transformation similar to what happens with the columns is applied to objects and props. Large flat loaves of *lavash*—a traditional Armenian bread placed, according to wedding traditions, on the shoulders of the bride and groom—in one scene create a gown for the female character played by Simona Sala. In the first scene, while she lies on the floor, Sala's naked shoulders are brutally wrapped in sheets of dough that are thrown at her; later, a dress made of lavash becomes a garment of social stigma forced on a woman who has been raped. At another moment, hungry women grab scraps of lavash, stuffing them in their mouths as if they were gags. Similarly, pomegranates are torn apart numerous times by the women, especially by Sala. Pomegranates are fruits with deep symbolic meaning representing marriage, fertility, and regeneration. In Christian iconography, they represent eternal life, but the opposite as well: a pomegranate is also the fruit of Persephone, of death. In Greek and other cultures connected to the ancient Western traditions (including Armenian), pomegranates are crushed into the earth for good luck. In *Armine, Sister* the fruit is bitten into and torn apart in ways suggesting rape, sexual violence, and death. The connection with violence and dying is clear at the end when a woman wipes mashed pomegranate onto the wood gravestones and then a male angrily wipes it off with sand.

Photos are another set of props with dual meanings. They are very important evidence of genocide. The most important set of such images regarding the Armenian genocide are photos taken by Armin T. Wegner, a German officer during the genocide and eventually a human rights activist. In 1915 Wegner documented the suffering of the Armenians, collecting evidence of the atrocities perpetrated against them. As part of the *Armine, Sister* project, ZAR organized exhibitions of Wegner's photos and emphasized his courage and the important role he played in the struggle against destroying evidence of the genocide. The production uses empty film canisters and cameras as symbols of suffering, torture, and debasement. In one early scene, a woman (Kamila Klamut) weeps over a half-naked man. The scene plays out in such a way as to have the "deceased" changing position every few moments, in order to present another "photogenic" figure of death and mourning while camera flashes illuminate the stage. Then, in a later scene, the camera is raised by the perpetrators to document the suffering of a raped and tortured woman (Simona Sala), brutally forced to turn her grimacing face in the direction of the bright camera flash while placing a piece of photographic film beneath her head (see fig. 1).

Acting as a counterpoint to these complex transformations of space and objects, the musical element of the production is rich and layered. The songs are performed by a chorus partly hidden in the dark space rimming the stage area, surrounding the action with their voices. This concealment throughout amplifies the impact of their presence when the singers walk onto the illuminated section of the stage in the culminating sequence. Preceding the finale of profound silence, their movement into the light takes on remarkable meaning, especially through the presence of Aram Kerovpyan, who conducts the chorus. With his wonderfully wrinkled face, wild head and beard of grey hair, he creates a distinct portrait of a man who lives in his own cultural tradition, and is proof that any attempt to destroy it is doomed to fail.

The chorus include Armenians (Aram Kerovpyan, a master of Armenian monody, his son Vahan Kerovpyan, and Davit Baroyan); Iranians (sisters Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat); and Turks (Dengbesz Kazo and Murat İçlinaıça). Together they create a dramatic soundscape interlacing sacral hymns from Armenia with Iranian and Turkish songs. It is especially the musical testimony of the Turks that embodies the essential theme: the Turkish extermination of Armenians.

The music of *Armine, Sister* is, for people who do not know Middle Eastern music (most of the audience), a complex topic. I know that these are songs with a rich history, sung in an accomplished fashion by singers invited to take part in the performance. But because of the foreign languages as well as the unfamiliar sound structures, I was unable to grasp the meaning of the songs, as I expect was true for most in the audience. Some sound like lullabies, others like prayers, and yet others like dramatic tales intoned by a virtuoso singer—but these are only associations. I listen to the music as an audible yet nonverbal expression of suffering, evil, and death.

This comes through most vividly in the actions of the four female characters, three of whom come from previous productions. The only change is their relationship to one another. The woman played by Klamut, injured and furious at the same time, carried by the male players in a recurring scene reminiscent of one from *Anbelli*, seems an angel stripped of voice and energy, not so much fallen as pierced with pain. She mourns the murdered, lamenting the dead being photographed, taking sand flowing from the broken columns and pouring it over herself. She holds one panel, which when placed on the ground transforms from a gravestone into a cradle for a dead or unborn baby.

This is followed by Ditte Berkeley, who in *Gospels of Childhood* played the sister and rival of characters played by Klamut, making movements using lavash loaves, pomegranates, and stones, trying helplessly to transfer her strength to others, especially those characters played by Sala. Berkeley begins her performance by holding a candle to her breast, as if to nurse the flame ignited from a temple torch, suggesting the Madonna (whose symbolic fruit is a pomegranate). She ends the scene as a bride in a white dress stained with the blood-red juice of the crushed pomegranates. The characters played by Klamut and Berkeley seem to have come from another world, from a reality where resurrection is possible, or at least imaginable. But in the desert, collapsing into sand, they are unable to do anything. Even when they offer support to the other female characters, their actions express torment, not comfort.

Next to these two, moving to the front of the stage, is the character I called the Third Woman when writing about *Gospels* (Aleksandra Kotecka). She becomes Sala's primary, then only partner; they alone are onstage at the end. She performs a series of actions involving piles of square fragments of old film that she at first strews about the stage as if they are torn from her own body. She repeats actions from previous productions, resting against prop doors that have been stripped from their frames. Then she falls, landing on the doors with a loud bang. Throughout the performance, she fails to find any trace of a sacred past, any places of prayer in the ever-disintegrating space. And finally, in one striking moment, she pushes a crushed pomegranate against her naked breast, generating associations ranging from motherhood to rape.

An Italian performer, Sala, joined the company for *Armine, Sister*. Sala's physicality, willingness to destroy the cultural stereotypes of beauty, and her radical performing style remind me of female performers from the 1970s or 1980s (Ewa Partum and Natalia LL in Poland, for example, or Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramović internationally). In *Armine, Sister* Sala bursts forth with sudden movements, wrestles with herself, and shows destruction and rape by biting and shredding pomegranates. Gradually, it becomes clear that the character Sister Armine is mostly her (even if this is an oversimplification). She is the victim — tortured, raped, and ripped apart. In one scene a ball of red wool is pulled from her pants and then wrapped around her body, trapping her in a blood-red web. A bucket of sand is dumped over her by a soldier. Lying on the floor she traces the outline of her semi-naked body in the sand. She performs this dying scene over and over again.



Figure 10. *The sands of death*. Tomasz Wierzbowski, Aleksandra Kotecka, Simona Sala, and Alessandro Curti in *Armine, Sister*. Teatr ZAR, Na Grobli Studio, Wrocław, 2014. (Photo by Karol Jarek; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

The image of Sala's/Sister Armine's body in the sand occurs in the closing scene. In the last of the group scenes we hear and then see the singers who enter the lit stage. Evoked are the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians who still cannot be mourned where they fell and whose cemeteries still cannot be constructed. So we weep over them and build them graves in the theatre. Then the song stops and the singers exit. Only the women are onstage. Klamut lies for a long time next to the sand-covered crib. Then she rises and leaves the stage. Berkeley covers herself in a bloodied white shroud, a raped and murdered bride. When she leaves the stage, she hangs the shroud on a tall ladder. Only two women are left on the stage. After a moment of silence one of them suddenly, with a sense of resignation, lowers the straps of her dress and, half naked, covers herself in sand. Her position is tension itself: her torso lowered, one hand touching the ground, the other held erect in the air as if wanting to tear free from the earth toward which the rest of her body is pulled. Finally, she straightens, covers her breasts, and after a while repeats the same sequence of moves on another part of the stage. Sala/Armine cuddles the sand, rests in it a moment, and then takes off the red dress her oppressors had thrown at her earlier, and lies down in the sand where her body left an impression earlier. Then she rises and for a long time pours sand from a bucket. She repeats this sequence several times, then lies back on the ground and covers her feet, breasts, and head with sand: a broken statue crushed and half-buried in the desert. Third Woman leaves the stage, but soon returns. Half-naked again, she has a red lipstick in her hand. She paints her lips, approaches the prostate woman and kisses her. She leaves, gently touching doors suspended over the stage from chains. Stillness falls; silence for a very long time.

In the 2013 pre-premiere version of *Armine, Sister*, nothing told the audience that the performance had ended. People could sit as long as they wanted, staring at the stage: the ruined temple, sand, furniture suspended on chains, the half-naked female body. Fret, who watched



each performance from the side, later said that some spectators reacted directly. A woman hugged Sala, someone else covered her up, someone else tried to lift her and brush the sand off. But mostly audiences sat in silence, some confused, others irritated. Recently, Fret introduced an action at the end. Fret enters the stage and covers Sala's body with a white sheet, leaving only her face visible. A while later, lights go up in the auditorium. No one can doubt that the performance is over. To me, this addition is reminiscent of Tadeusz Kantor's gesture at the end of *Wielopole/Wielopole* (1980), when he carefully folds up the cloth covering the onstage table.

The silence at the end of *Armine, Sister* is the silence of grief. It is the silence of memories, not only about the murdered Armenians, but also all the other millions whose suffering and death are written into the annals of European history. Fret has often repeated that he's not reenacting genocide, not showing it, or letting us hear it, because he has neither the means to do so nor the right. The tragedy of genocide, though it has been written about and photographed, cannot be shown onstage, because it is not and cannot be our actual experience. The same is true of death, which remains the dark center of the *Gospels of Childhood* triptych. Genocide can only be experienced by its victims, and what we are dealing with onstage, in art, even in documentary archives, are paradoxical traces of something "we" cannot remember, the experience of loss "we" cannot feel because it doesn't affect us directly. *Armine, Sister* and the next, slowly emerging triptych produced by Teatr ZAR represent an attempt to call up such experiences: literally and tangibly opening wounds in us that heal over daily and we cover up. ZAR, a theatre company named after songs that accompany the souls of the departed, asks us to recall victims we don't know how to remember. This is the bell John Donne writes of: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee" ([1624] 2010).

In a world where everything is programmed to offer up the best "user experience," ZAR seeks an experience of a wholly different weight, what Fret calls a "witness/action." A witness action cannot be precisely explained; it is more a question than an answer. The figure of the "witness" echoes Grotowski, who having created a "holy actor" then tried to transform the viewer into an actual witness responding to the "total act." Grotowski focused on this in his talk "Theatre and Ritual":

One has to ask the question about what the calling of the audience is about, much as we can ask about the actor's calling. The viewer's calling: to be an observer; but more than that: to be a witness. A witness is not someone who sticks their nose into other people's business, who tries to get closest or else to interfere in other people's lives. A witness keeps to the sidelines, not wanting to interfere, keen to remain objective, to see what is happening from start to finish, and to retain memory: visions of events should become a part of the witness. I once saw a documentary film about a Buddhist monk who performed an act of auto-da-fé in Saigon. There was a crowd of monks around him, observing the scene. Some of them helped the one who was trying to kill himself, preparing everything, while others kept a certain distance, almost hidden, remaining still throughout the ordeal, keeping so quiet one could hear the whisper of flames and the silence. No one moved a muscle. Those people really did participate. They participated in a ceremony that was a final act in relation to the world and life. On the other hand, because it was a monk, a Buddhist, they were also participating in a religious sense. However, they did not intervene, remaining off to the side. *Respicio* is a Latin word, meaning respect for things, which is the actual function of a witness: to not interfere with their miserable role, with that horrible demonstration, that "me too," but to be a witness—meaning not to forget, not to forget at any cost. (Grotowski [1969] 2012:359–60)

Questions asked by Fret seem similar to those of Grotowski, but they are asked in a different social and political context. First, they relate to actions taken by witnesses, to that which audiences literally are able to do. And second, they do not include direct witnesses, only those

that Fret calls “witnesses of witnesses.” In this way, he describes himself and his fellow artists as people who, having studied direct witness statements and having broadened their knowledge about what transpired, create actions that are not meant to be a reenactment or reflection of their knowledge or reactions to the facts they discover, but something of a broadcasting frequency between inaccessible experience and (re)actions of the audience, who are also called on to be “witnesses of witnesses” (even if at a level once more removed). This process makes it difficult for audiences to slot ZAR productions (especially the most recent two) into familiar cognitive schemes, to “read them” somehow through emotional empathy and/or aesthetic delight. The final scene of *Armine, Sister*, for example, lasts so long and its actions are so repetitive and predictable that spectators can become annoyed, cut off from any easy experience of sympathy towards the “unfortunate victims.” To my mind, this is a conscious strategy, and its risky aim is to knock audiences off their theatrical balance, to redirect their attention, to question themselves.

## Medeas

Asking about personal responsibility can seem relatively easy when dealing with atrocities that occurred a hundred years ago. When it comes to more contemporary traumas this is much harder to do. I am talking about the refugees coming to Europe, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East. Escaping war and hunger, looking for security and the chance for a better life, these people have become the fuel powering the dynamics of exclusion and oppression, strengthening nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist movements.

In Poland, a country where the majority claims to live in accordance with the values of Roman Catholicism, the right-wing, church-supporting government has built its success on a determined and stubborn refusal to take in even the smallest number of “migrants” (the word usually used by politicians instead of refugees), as well as cynically fanning fear of foreigners and the “Other.” Justified by the state and its propaganda, egoism and fear has meant that even cardinals and bishops speak weakly on this subject, while supporting the nationalists and the ruling party. The tragedy of those drowning in the Mediterranean Sea and those dying as a result of the civil war in Syria has been forgotten or ignored by a large part of the Polish nation. Many Poles are misled by fictional and false justifications, and enflamed by racist and Islamophobic arguments supporting the nationalistic agenda of “ourness.”

Set against this backdrop of xenophobia and hypocrisy, some hope may be found in the fact that the majority of those working in the arts have become a sort of national conscience. Among the strongest and clearest expressions is ZAR’s most recent production, the one I described at the beginning of this article, *Medeas: On Getting Across*.

The performance uses the myth of Medea in an uncertain, subversive way. There are no direct indications of the myth beside the name used in plural as the title and the female protagonist. Much like the company’s previous production, *Medeas* emerged out of a series of experiences, journeys, and meetings, taking place this time in the south of Europe where refugees arrive and where barbed wire and walls erected by various countries stop them in their tracks. One of ZAR’s journeys ended in Lampedusa and Sicily, the Italian islands closest to Africa, where boats carrying refugees land most often and where the bodies of those who drown during such crossings are most often deposited. Another journey led to people who help new arrivals to Greek refugee camps. The voices of these people can be heard telling their tales when audience members enter the space of the performance, which Jarosław Fret, after the premiere of *Medeas*, reimagined as the installation *My Eye Is My Country* (2017), adding the recordings and various materials and documents related to the situation of migrants in Italy.

The involvement of Simona Sala, the lead and this time almost sole performer onstage, is hard to consider only within the conventions of theatre. Much as in *Armine, Sister* her role involves a series of performative actions within a space arranged like an art installation. Elements of set design and props are lifted and lowered, sometimes accompanied by the noise



*Figure 11. Moving through a world of refuse and leftovers. Simona Sala in Medeas. Teatr ZAR, Laboratorium Room, Wrocław, 2016. (Photo by Maciej Zakrzewski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)*

of electric engines and chains, sounding like apocalyptic steampunk. The massive heavy machinery, the rusty, scratched-up walls enclosing the space, the old doors through which audiences enter, bunches of rusty keys that spill out on the floor, the unmoving wood swing suspended over a corner of the stage—all this contrasts with water, tanks covered with heavy lids placed evenly around the stage. Sala fills plastic bags of water, turning them into the belly of a pregnant woman, or a child, or some other burden. At times, she puts her head inside a water-filled bag, keeping it there until it seems as if she's almost drowned, ripping the plastic with sudden, despairing movements of teeth and mouth, which then spill water and glass beads the color of pearls. One of the most moving images, repeated several times, is of Sala holding a water-filled plastic bag, pushing her hands out to us or to a closed door as if she wants to offer this to us, and at the same time wants the gift to secure for her our understanding, or at least our attention. In the web of scenic metaphors, it is this water-filled bag, the sort of bag

we throw away by the thousands each day, which becomes a grave for those who have not been buried, who have been lost, whom we have allowed to drown near the shores of our lands. Sala's Medea moves through a world of refuse and leftovers. All she has at her disposal are rusty keys, worn-out shoes, steel springs from a battered mattress. She sometimes dons disposable coveralls, the outfit workers wear moving between piles of dead bodies or across dangerous landfills.

The music of the production is provided by singers who come from Iran (Marjan Vahdat) and Turkey (Selda Öztürk). Through most of the performance, they sit opposite each other on either side of the central platform, accompanying Sala. The drama playing out between them pulsates in tensions that escalate and fall, with changes in intensity and dynamics, but I am not able to understand the words or recognize any familiar elements. This inability to understand is dangerous because it presents the risk of rejection by uncomprehending spectators. It also offers those who respond emotionally to separate themselves from the rest of the listeners, to receive it in full. Perhaps they are taken out of their comfort zone. Maybe they will feel, as I did, that they, not the refugees, are aliens in this world, the one that our Medeas come from.

Neither *Medeas* nor earlier ZAR productions are based on a simplified, fictionalized experience of the universally human. The creators of this theatre have given so much attention to

their histories, making such effort with their bodies and voices to enter specific experiences and lives, generating and preserving cultures in their songs, images, words, and spaces, that one cannot accuse them of a tepid, easy universalism. Of course, ZAR crosses borders between cultures, connecting elements from a range of sources. But ZAR is not interested in intercultural theatre; it is not trying to achieve an effect above or beyond specific cultural understandings. With increasing confidence and self-awareness, Fret works with elements from a range of cultures and traditions, without turning them into

an anthropological patchwork or some trail back to early human experiences. He treats them as elements of composition and dramaturgy, juxtaposing music, movement, objects, and scenography in a way that may inspire audiences to search for their own way of experiencing and understanding the performances, even if in certain moments it may result in disorientation.

ZAR previously worked with elements that come from a range of traditions, musical ones above all, most vividly in *Armine*, *Sister*, but in *Medeas* it is an essential part of the dramaturgy. For example, the two singers' voices are accompanied by four male actor-singers secluded at the back of the performance space acting as stagehands and as the chorus, not just with their voices but also with the sounds they make drumming rhythmically on the metal walls, or pouring water on them. These men accompany the women intoning parts of the Catholic Requiem ("Dies irae," "Confutatis") sung in such a way that they echo Sardinian and Corsican musicians with whom ZAR cooperated while developing *Caesarean Section* and *Anbelli*. The Catholic hymns, which in the older productions (like "Kyrie" in *Caesarean Section*) were often at the center of the performance, are withdrawn in *Medeas*, hidden. Subtly the background chorus enhances the songs performed by the women. It also is a commentary on and counterpoint to the women. What the male chorus sings are excerpts of a mass for the dead and visions of the final judgment of the condemned. Sitting in the dark I have the feeling that this is a prayer for us in the audience...

The power of *Medeas: On Getting Across* resides not in the horror experienced by those seeking refuge in Europe, but in the way the production slowly places us within the harsh, disorienting center of the migration. We who are calm and safe are the ones with whom our *Medeas* are trying to communicate. In *Medeas*, Fret uses voices that have been heard in earlier productions where they related personal reflections created by the actors improvising with songs or other key elements transported from distant, alien cultural contexts whose complex meanings would be only partially explained. Referring to the *Gospels of Childhood* triptych, the critic Maria Shevtsova describes this very aptly:

In any case, the great majority of ZAR listener-spectators do not know and are not expected to know either the precise sources of the songs or the precise liturgical circumstances in which they are sung. This is the task of researchers. What matters (or not) for listener-spectators is how they engage (or not) with the material offered to



Figure 12. *The song not to be understood. Selda Öztürk in Medeas. Teatr ZAR, Sala Laboratorium Room, Wrocław, 2016. (Photo by Maciej Zakrzewski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)*

them as theatre performance, and so as an artistic construction, and whether [...] they “accept”—fundamentally, emotionally [...]—and go along with the journey the performance takes them on. (Shevtsova 2013:176)

In *Armene*, *Sister* and especially in *Medeas*, this dramaturgy of non-understanding, which seems to direct the crucial questions of engagement and attention towards the listener-spectators, is even more essential to the production. Misunderstanding is not only allowed, it is assumed to come into play at precisely the place the audience expects something else: in the performance’s only spoken-word section.

After the second series of actions involving the water-filled bags, the stage space goes dark. A moment of silence, then suddenly a word: *Apotheotika* (Greek for “she who is deified”), followed by other words spoken by Sala in a voice that is calm and decisive yet pained. I listen and try to understand, but am only able to decode the meaning of some words, those that have entered the general lexicon: *anthropos* (“human”), *soma* (“body”), *ema* (“I,” “me,” “mine”). I hear *monothea*, which through a connection to monotheism can be understood as “faithful” or “she who worships one god.” These words return numerous times, but without knowing more Greek it is impossible to combine them into complete thoughts. Even Greeks, whom I have asked about this text, find it enigmatic. The text is the chant *I Anthropos*,<sup>12</sup> written especially for this production by poet Dimitris Dimitriadis. This poem was recently published in Greece with ZAR’s help. But audiences receive no explanation of the text before or after the performance. When asked, Fret and Sala say that although they know its general sense, they can’t explain it word for word (Sala learned to pronounce it phonetically). The text remains a mystery. When I discussed this with Fret, he said that he intended the text to be opaque. Even a very careful listener should only recognize individual words meant to invoke Medea: this alien, unknowable woman, suffering and proud, radiating an ambivalent divinity, arousing delight and fear.

This is the moment in which Medea manifests most clearly. Associations we might have had with children lost, instigated by such images as the water-filled bag bursting against Sala’s stomach, and the long, silent pause when she sits motionless before an empty, immobile double swing, begin in retrospect to accumulate into a story of a woman whose children have died, and who may blame herself for their deaths. Perhaps she is a woman with a singular story, perhaps a representative of mother-refugees who have in one way or another lost their children; perhaps she is Europe who has denied access to people escaping from countries that they themselves termed the “cradle of culture.” The scenic metaphor radiates multiple meanings. ZAR willfully makes the scene difficult or incomprehensible in order to release many possible meanings. We, the audience, experience a multitude of meanings while at the same time remaining outside all of them. Sala’s monologue-chant is accompanied by a zar sung by the chorus of four men. This funeral song completes the earlier zar excerpts, yet sounds completely different from the zar sung in the *Gospels* where it filled the space, entering the bodies of everyone present. In *Medeas*, Requiem is a weak, distant echo, delicately supporting and weaving into the words confidently spoken by Sala. The mourning song originated from lands Medea left to come to Greece, and the resonant yet incomprehensible words are spoken in a language we once knew. In this way, it becomes a zar for us, for a dying Europe forsaking its own origins, shutting the gates against arrivals from countries that were the cradle of European culture and that fed Europe new energies for centuries.

This turning towards audience-witnesses, placing them at the heart of the production’s dramaturgy, is even more important in the finale. The chorus members lift the lids of the water tanks and throw in items from their pockets: mobile phones, keys, small change. A wood platform, which had been lowered to the stage on rattling chains by a noisy engine, rises on

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12. A title that is difficult to translate, especially into English—the word means “human being” or “person” but is written with a determinative that indicates a female subject: in Polish it would be *ta człowieka*, and in English perhaps “she human being.”





Figure 13. *Apotheotika*. Simona Sala and Marjan Vahdat (sitting in the back) in *Medeas*. Teatr ZAR, Laboratorium Room, Wrocław, 2016. (Photo by Maciej Zakrzewski; courtesy of Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego)

one side, forming a lopsided deck. Medea clamps a gasoline engine to it, the kind used on boats carrying refugees to Europe. She starts the engine. The performance space is filled with the noise of the engine and the stench of its fumes. The chorus performers open the water tanks and throw handfuls of chemicals in, converting the liquid into a billowing fog that floats along the floor. The lighting transforms the stage fog into the surface of the sea. The chorus stops as it departs by way of the entry door, looking for a moment at the space, then exits. They are followed by the Medeas. We, the calm and safe residents of the closed-off European continent, are left aboard this noisy, smelly, rickety raft, sailing into nothingness.

At the outset the heroes of *Medeas: On Getting Across* are alien women sharing experiences we do not want to comprehend or accept. Gradually the performance turns against us, the passive and helpless witnesses—today’s Jasons and tomorrow’s Medeas. At the performance’s end, the audience sits, confounded, not told that the play is over. Nobody applauds, because there is no one to clap for, and in any case the noise of the outboard motor would drown out any clapping. The visual composition is beautiful, but there is no way to sit for any length of time and contemplate it. The stench of the poisonous gas exhaust makes it harder and harder to breathe. Some spectators have complained that their health was put at risk without advance warning. We leave, trying to find our way through the mist.

At the exits, each departing spectator is handed an envelope attached to a copy of the declaration form that every refugee is required to complete on arriving in Italy. Inside the envelope is a printout of statistics covering all who have died or been lost crossing the Mediterranean in 2015 and 2016 (9,000 human beings), an excerpt from a conversation with Dr. Pietro Bartolo of Lampedusa, and a photo of part of a woman’s body, one of many recovered from those waters. There are also photos of refugee camps and a copy of a drawing by one of the children living there. And finally, perhaps the most important item in each envelope: a rusting, salt-encrusted key on a broken piece of string.

## Exit, but Not the End

In autumn 2017, the two productions I have just described, *Armine*, *Sister* and *Medeas*: *On Getting Across*, were performed together as a diptych. It was in this format that I saw them in Madrid, during Teatr ZAR's residency at the Matadero contemporary art center. Its spacious facilities allowed two performance spaces to be set opposite one another: on the right, *Armine*, on the left, *Medeas*. The diptych begins on the *Armine* side, where audiences gather around a group of singers and musicians surrounding cellist Aleksandra Kotecka, with Simona Sala next to her. Sala breathes into a microphone amplifying the sound of her breath. After a few repetitions, Sala calls out "Again" and Kotecka begins to play the few notes of the opening of *Medeas*. Sala and the members of the men's chorus take their plastic bags and water canisters—and move across the space to the other staging area, where two women vocalists are seated. When *Medeas* concludes, the audience comes back to the *Armine*, *Sister* area. There, without an intermission, the second performance begins.

I was surprised by the reversal of the order in which the two parts were presented, abandoning the chronology of their development. This changes the meaning of both productions immensely: *Armine* beginning when *Medeas* concludes can be read as an anamnesis that the protagonist of the diptych goes through, which is something audiences also participate in. On a historical and political level, the reversal raises the question about the deep sources of the evil encroaching on Europe and the world, and even suggests an analogy between the Armenian genocide and the increase in xenophobic and nationalistic tendencies.

Perhaps this trip into the past is a trip into a possible future, one that ZAR is warning us about before it is too late, reminding us of the danger of nationalism. On personal and also philosophical levels, the anamnesis of *Armine* evokes both a deepening reflection on the sources of evil and our responsibility for them, as well as something that demands to be witnessed.

Anything that might be said at present about the still-emerging triptych is supposition. It seems pointless to try and define the kind of theatre practiced and created by ZAR, a relatively young and still developing company. Over the years, the company has developed their own scenic language, rich in cultural experiences as well as specialist knowledge on cultures, historical events, and political issues accrued by the many individuals they have met and collaborated with. Were I to grasp at some synthetic definition—taking a risk—I would say Teatr ZAR is a "theatre out of death." I am aware that the name I propose may seem too close to the famous "Theatre of Death" of Tadeusz Kantor. But I am taking this risk to suggest that ZAR—belonging to the same Polish romantic tradition of Mickiewicz and his *Forefathers' Eve* that both Grotowski and Kantor referred to—works in the opposite direction than of Kantor's Cricot 2. It is not the theatre of death, but *out of* it and *against* it: against death as a means of forgetting both individuals and groups, but also *out of* death as a protest against it. ZAR's work is an affirmation of life, challenging death through dark and deep play.

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