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## Teatr ZAR's Journeys of the Spirit

Teatr ZAR has been developing its *Gospels of Childhood* triptych since 2003, when the company was founded after several years of research in Armenia, Iran, and Georgia. It was in Georgia that ZAR learned polyphonic songs from the Svan oral tradition, which it developed in its unique song theatre. In this article Maria Shevtsova maps the first of a series of expeditions, the latter notably including Greece, Corsica, and Sardinia. She describes how the ancient hymns and chants gathered through direct oral transmission (ZAR's choice of material reflects its interest in the songs of early Christianity) provide the subject matter and the spiritual dimension of the group's performance pieces. The idea of the 'spiritual' is here distinguished from the strictly religious/denominational as well as the ritualistic or cultic framings of the word. Details from the triptych show how breath, vibration and energy are the forces of ZAR's sonic compositions in which singing, instrumental music, sound making, and movement are vehicles for experience other than immediate material sensation. Reference is made to ZAR's link to the Grotowski legacy in the song theatre of Poland today. Maria Shevtsova, Chair Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London, wishes to thank the International Research Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin for hosting her research, of which this article is an integral part.

*Key terms:* song theatre, early Christianity, Zar, polyphony, breath, vibration, energy, spirit.

WROCLAW in Poland is the home of Teatr ZAR, an exceptionally powerful song theatre group whose quality of sound and capacity for penetrating listeners to their very core is quite unique – even though ZAR is not a one-off phenomenon, but is attached to the Grotowski lineage. Jerzy Grotowski had explored the processes of sound-making and how they released energy from deep within the human body to interconnect with the spirit. It was necessarily through the body that the path led along the 'vertical' (Grotowski's term) to something other than the earthly, material state in which human beings live from day to day.<sup>1</sup> This, in its highest manifestations, belongs to the 'divine'.

As is well known, Grotowski first took this path going upwards with his 'holy actor', treating theatre as a 'sacred' action that touched, like grace, those who participated in it, performers and spectators alike.<sup>2</sup> The next step, Paratheatre (1969–78), which first took place in Wrocław, turned its back on the theatre to focus on 'meetings' – Grotowski's word is 'encounters' – designed not for the production of artefacts, but for opening up the mind, body, and soul of

individuals, each making of a Paratheatre event what he or she required.

These concerns overlapped with the explorations of Theatre of Sources (1976–82), where Grotowski developed his interest in transcendental, ritual and ecstatic practices, and so also in song as a vehicle for spiritual journeys.<sup>3</sup> Among his various models were the wandering bards of Bengal, the Baul, with whom he was personally connected.

While the chronology noted here 'tidies up' what was intricate in Grotowski's work, the main point of referring to it is not for the sake of order, but to draw attention to the ongoing, interconnected rather than separate, research of these so-called periods, in which the vocalization, chant, and incantation practised by the Laboratory Theatre in its earlier years found different means of expression. These kept affirming, particularly with and after *The Constant Prince* (1965), their purpose of travelling along the 'vertical', which filtered through to the three main song theatre groups among several in Poland that share, in some fashion, the Grotowski heritage: the Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices, Song of the Goat, and Teatr ZAR.

Paratheatre is the pivotal link between these three groups in so far as one of its 'leaders' was Włodzimierz Staniewski, who in 1977 founded Gardzienice, the company named after the village in Eastern Poland where it is still based today. Anna Zubrzycki performed with Gardzienice for sixteen years before she and Grzegorz Bral, who was with Gardzienice for five years, established Song of the Goat in Wrocław in 1996. Jarosław Fret and Kamila Klamut, who founded Teatr ZAR in 2003, had worked with Zubrzycki and Bral from 1996 to 1999. Fret had spent a year and a half with Staniewski in the early 1990s, and, like Klamut, had been involved in workshops run by former members of the Laboratory Theatre, Rena Mirecka and Zygmunt Molik notably among them.<sup>4</sup>

Although these groups come from the same source, each has its distinctive character and remains utterly itself. (This is true, too, of the Pontedera branch of the family tree, established by Grotowski with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini at the Work-center of Jerzy Grotowski, to which he added Richards's name in 1996.) None of them has so completely made the journeys of the spirit the *subject* of its theatre work as Teatr ZAR.

The distinction relied upon here is the central focus of productions, irrespective of whatever private religious commitments affect or inform them. Zubrzycki and Bral, for instance, are close to Buddhism, and, while Buddhism underpins their artistic outlook and several of their principles for training performers, Song of the Goat performances are not explicitly about Buddhist concerns. ZAR's single-minded attention to the human spirit, on the other hand, is explicitly mediated through Christianity, though not through any one particular denomination; and their themes of birth, life, death, rebirth, and resurrection are fully shaped from within a Christian perspective.

Even so, they are not ecclesiastical but aspire to the 'spiritual' – the word to be understood without the fey, 'New Age', or cultic connotations that have accrued to it. ZAR, moreover, is not a Christian group *per se*, nor would all of its members claim to be Christians. What unites them is the spiritual

dimension and context of the ancient songs from time immemorial that they sing, irrespective of their personal beliefs. Some songs in their performance pieces are, in fact, secular.

The titles of ZAR productions indicate, as well, a clearly identifiable Christian dimension – thus *Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, with which the group was officially formed in 2003. It was the first part of what ZAR was soon to call its 'trilogy', the term's allusion to Christian icons being altogether deliberate. *Caesarian Section: Essays on Suicide* followed in 2007. Then, in 2009, came *Anhelli: the Calling* based on Juliusz Słowacki's 1838 poem *Anhelli*, in which the titular hero travels to Jerusalem to accomplish both a spiritual and a secular mission – failing in the second, which was to liberate Poland from the Russian Empire, but having undergone significant experiences in pursuit of the first.

It is worth recalling, given the links between ZAR and Grotowski, that Grotowski used Słowacki's play *Kordian* (1834), which has similar quest motifs and allegorical intentions, for his production of the same name (1962). Quest and allegory, driven by Messianic, not to say metaphysical or mystical ideals are features of nineteenth-century Polish Romanticism, which has left its traces in Grotowski's world view.<sup>5</sup> This culturally specific type of Romanticism could be said to resurface in ZAR's activities from which the trope of 'journey', both as inward and physical travel, is inseparable.

### Expeditions – Armenia, Georgia, Iran

Before founding ZAR, Fret and Klamut had undertaken a number of research expeditions – this term being very much Staniewski's for Gardzienice's travels in the border territories of eastern Poland in search of forgotten peoples and their songs. Fret and Klamut went elsewhere, motivated by their fascination with very early Christianity, and Fret has dwelt on the importance for him of its musical forms.<sup>6</sup> Both had read Andrew Welburn's *The Beginnings of Christianity:*

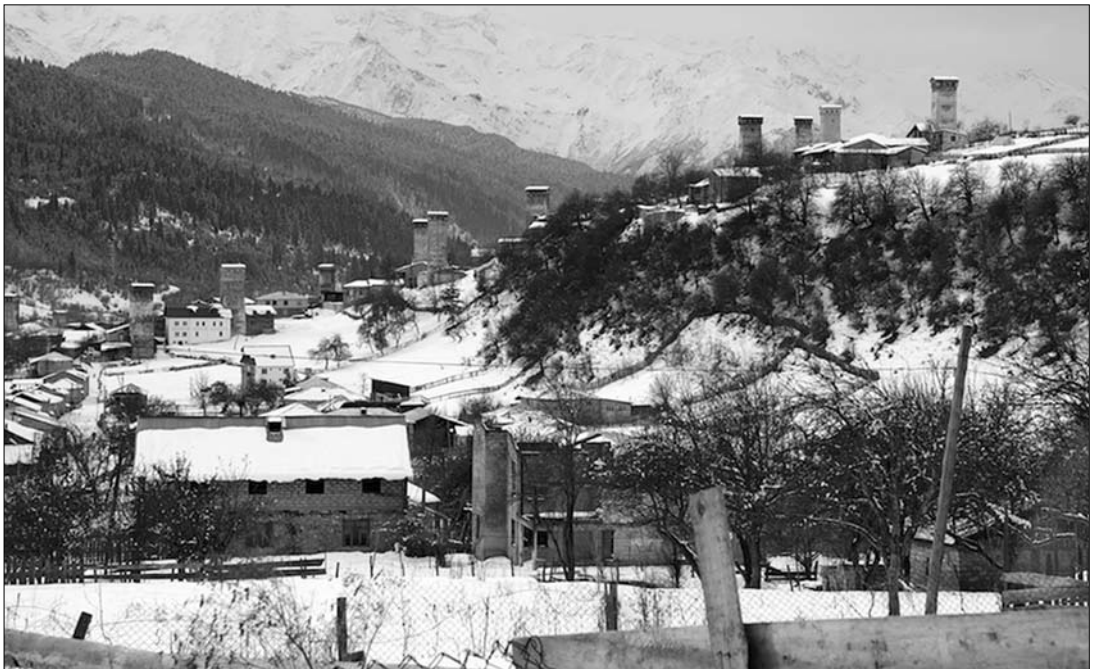
*Essene Mystery, Gnostic Revelation, and the Christian Vision*;<sup>7</sup> and it is not difficult to see how Welburn's account of Gnostic 'secret knowledge' and the relations and disconnections between the canonical and the apocryphal Gospels had made a great impact on two young people eager to discover worlds beyond their traditional Catholic upbringing. Fret had an abiding interest in the liturgy of the Armenian Church, Armenia being the first country to adopt Christianity as its official religion.

Their first expedition was in 1999 to Armenia – a crucible of Christian faith – and to Georgia for its old Orthodox tradition and polyphonic singing. Iran was also an important destination because Welburn's brief references to the Mandeans had excited their curiosity: the last surviving Mandeans living unobtrusively in Iran are purportedly the descendants of a people who had known John the Baptist and who, in any event, practised immersion baptismal rituals thought to have been specific to him.<sup>8</sup> Fret and Klamut did, indeed, witness these rituals and afterwards returned to Iran in two consecutive years. Images of washing, probably in part inspired by this experience, recur frequently

in *Gospels*, where they are linked by association (typical of ZAR's composition) rather than by direct reference to the significance of baptism as rebirth in the apocryphal Gospels of the apostles Philip, Thomas, and John.

Fret and Klamut returned to Georgia with a small group of collaborators in 2000, where, in Tbilisi, the country's capital, the extraordinary singing in the Sioni Orthodox Cathedral transported them. They were blown away, most of all, by the *Kyrie, eleison* (Lord, have mercy) of the liturgy, sung by a soprano to a male bass line, which, in ZAR's version for several female voices, was to become key to *Gospels*. An audiotape of the Sioni *Kyrie* in the ZAR archive, although of poor quality, manages to convey its transcendent beauty. Something of its deep calm and abnegation of ego was to reappear in *Anhelli*, which has the intimate, quiet atmosphere of prayer and which closes the triptych thematically and, as well, in terms of the emotional threads that connect its separate sections.

In 2001, Fret and Klamut went for the first time to hear and learn the polyphonic singing, believed to be some 2,000 years old, of the Svan – Orthodox communities in Svaneti, which is a Georgian province in the highest



Mestia, Georgia, location of Teatr ZAR's expeditions to Svaneti. Photo: Magdalena Madra.



Eptime Pilpani. Photo: Magdalena Madra.

part of the Caucasus Mountains. They were taken under the wing of Eptime Pilpani from the Mestia district who, together with his middle-aged son Vakhtang and, on occasion, two other family members, taught them, and then the group of six who accompanied them in 2002, a range of polyphonic songs that became part of their growing repertoire.

### The Alchemy of Raw Material

Among them was the funeral song *Zar*, which is sung, as are other Svan polyphonic songs, in an ancient language no longer spoken or understood; and it is sung for hours on end to help the deceased's soul on its journey to the afterlife. *Zar*, from which the company took its name, is sung differently according to the village in which it belongs; and it is mostly kept and sung by a specific family rather than given over to the community at large.

Pilpani, in one of his teaching sessions in 2002, demonstrated the singing styles of a number of villages: some were softer, others in a higher key, while his own, from the village of Lendjeri has a full-abdominal, resonant sound.<sup>9</sup> His comparisons are enlightening, all the more so when it becomes evident that ZAR's way of singing *Zar* is by no means mere imitation: it is an innovative transposition, for a generically different kind

of performance, of what ZAR had first learned by copying, and then by fully making its own. One could call this the alchemy of raw material turned into theatre.

Pilpani rigorously taught the 2002 group, breaking down the syllables of unknown words and connecting syllables to sounds. He continually repeated them and had his pupils repeat them, building up phrases and then whole lines, which the pupils had to sing with him as they caught the right vocal sonority, phrasing, and tempo. All of this had to be memorized, since transmission of Svan polyphony is oral, none of it ever having been written down. Meanwhile, Pilpani's pupils invented their own notation to help them absorb and remember what they were hearing and singing. The whole Pilpani-ZAR dynamics of teaching and learning conveys very precisely what it means to speak of an oral tradition and how it is transmitted from generation to generation.

By the time the 2002 group premiered *Gospels*, it had acquired a strong sense of ensemble, fostered, also, by the demands of three-part harmony to work co-operatively, mindfully, and carefully together. When some left the group around 2006, its remaining core transmitted the group ethos together with its songs to the incomers, teaching much as Pilpani had taught them. This reconstituted ZAR, now made up of eleven people, travelled to Svaneti at the beginning of 2008, allowing the new members to learn directly from Pilpani. Similarly, they were able to experience at first hand the convivial environment of the Pilpani household, which hosted them, as it had previously welcomed the earlier travellers to its hearth in a majestic snowbound, mountainous landscape.<sup>10</sup> Immersion of this kind is conducive, as Konstantin Stanislavsky had discovered and shown decades previously, to developing an ensemble spirit among those who come together to be an ensemble, which is not automatically established just because they are in a group.

The ethno-musicological aspect of ZAR's research can hardly be ignored, but nor can it be dismissed as mere cultural pillage, first of all because the work is consistent and serious

and, second – most important still – because Pilpani was not only moved by the interest ZAR had shown, and was continuing to show, in the tradition close to his heart, but was also ready to pass on this tradition, regardless of the fact that ZAR was not Svan. And he was happy to see it in a theatre form and in a performance situation so different from the domestic, religious, and, in the case of Zar, the funereal contexts in which the Svan sing.

ZAR, moreover, includes women singing, whereas Svan polyphony is confined exclusively to men; and the presence of women's voices introduces warmth not typical of the weight of sound produced by the Svan male timbres. Whether this is a case of modernization as such is moot. What appears to be certain, however, is Pilpani's understanding, along with that of his family, that flexibility and even compromise with regard to tradition are necessary in order to prevent the tradition, as defined by its custodians, from losing its impetus, or simply dying out.

Further, had he not been satisfied with ZAR's adaptations, he would not have willingly travelled to Wrocław to teach ZAR there – his first of three visits, the last being in 2009 during the celebrations of the Year of Grotowski (the tenth anniversary of his death), when he visited with his family, gave open workshops, and sang with ZAR in public. Nor, still, would he have so hospitably welcomed in December 2011 the visit of Fret with several new people who were brought to Svaneti to grasp at first hand why Svan polyphony was seminal to the company; and this, apart from the appreciation it inspired, facilitated the sense of belonging and the practice of sharing necessary for ensemble theatre. These most recent additions to ZAR were for a new project that was now turning to Armenian liturgy.<sup>11</sup>

### Expeditions Further Afield

While the majority of the twenty songs and chants in *Gospels* are Georgian, whether Svan or from the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi, three are from the Orthodox Monastery of Mount Athos in Greece, to which ZAR had also

made expeditions from the very early to mid-2000s. And there is one Polish Catholic funeral song, performed shortly before Zar in the musical sequence Fret put together for *Gospels*, attentive to its overarching musical texture.

*Gospels* is generally fifty minutes long, as is *Caesarian Section*, while *Anhelli* is forty minutes. These parts are performed either as a triptych or singly as discrete pieces. When they are performed together their respective tones and temperament respond to each other, modifying each part in terms of the larger whole. Performed separately, each part opens out its own, particular character.

An expedition to Egypt in 2002 in search of the Coptic components of early Christianity did not produce performance material, either for *Gospels* or for the following pieces. Another expedition in the same year to Bulgaria, which has a renowned, centuries-old culture of polyphonic singing, provided two songs for *Caesarian Section*. ZAR also uses for this production a recomposed Svan song, a Chechen lament for women's voices, and a Danish lullaby. There are, in addition, two chants from Corsica, to which the now eleven-strong group had travelled in 2006 and 2007. One is a chant sung on Good Friday and the other a *Kyrie, eleison*.

The rest of the musical material of *Caesarian Section* is secular, and not sung. Astor Piazzola's tangos, ragtime, and Erik Satie's *Gnossienne* 3 layer other sonorities in the tapestry of sound. These are not recorded music but played by the performers on a cello, violin, accordion, piano, wind instrument and common saw, and are played at regular intervals in the ongoing flow of voices and movement. *Caesarian Section* is the only part of the triptych in which instruments of this kind are foregrounded. The music of a violin and an accordion are heard rather briefly in *Gospels*, in which gongs, chimes, and bells of varying tonal qualities and pitches prevail. In *Anhelli*, subtle sounds, including an intermittently brushed string, colour the tapestry until the magnificent richness of a Persian drum (in existence before Persia became Iran) beats out the penultimate scene.



The concluding scenes of *Gospels of Childhood*. Photos: Lukasz Giza.



*Gospels of Childhood*. Photo: Ken Reynolds.

### Integrity of the Triptych

*Anhelli*, by contrast with *Caesarian Section*, has a rather austere palette. The piece opens with an *irmos* (a short hymn, in Byzantine liturgy), which, here, is an *irmos* for Good Friday from the Valaam monastery in Russian Karelia; and it concludes with another Russian Orthodox *irmos*, which, this time, is sung for the 'falling asleep' or death of Mary, the mother of Jesus, during one of the twelve great feasts of Eastern Orthodoxy (the Assumption in the Roman Catholic Church).

This highly sacred framing of the work, with its clear evocation of the resurrections of Christ and Mary, is sustained by hymns, notably one from the Sioni Church (the Georgian thread continues right through the triptych from *Gospels*), and mostly Paschal chants from Sardinia. ZAR's expedition to Sardinia was in 2008, to the Catholic Castelsardo Brotherhood, celebrated, among many reasons, for its singing, as well as to Orosei, whose three confraternities come together with the whole town for the religious rites of Holy Week, culminating in Easter Sunday.

*Anhelli*'s entire choral structure, then, is a cradle for the very brief concluding *irmos*, whose last line is 'Lord, accept my soul'. This gentle, profoundly moving *irmos* is preceded by a vigorous Paschal chant, the beating drum, and the increasingly louder fall, again and again, of five male bodies. All fall at different moments to avoid doubling the choral singing with a chorus effect of movement: Fret's aim was musical counterpoint rather than repetition through visual mirroring. And the hard, thudding sound of falling on boards segues into the raucous, also syncopated, sound of the men ripping up the boards of the floor.

The narrow open spaces they make are the graves on which they lie to sing the *irmos*, their voices accompanied by the female voices of ZAR further away, in the shadows. The emotional impact of the scene and the power of the theatrical construction are such that the scene supersedes its immediate religious meaning, as implied by its hymns and chants, and becomes a synoptic image of all human suffering, regardless of creed.

In any case, the great majority of ZAR listener-spectators does not know and is 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 them as a theatre performance, and so as an artistic construction, and whether, in a world shy of avowed faiths, including the convictions of secular humanism, they 'accept' – fundamentally, emotionally, before it can become a sensation of illumination or transcendence – to go along the journey on which the performance takes them.

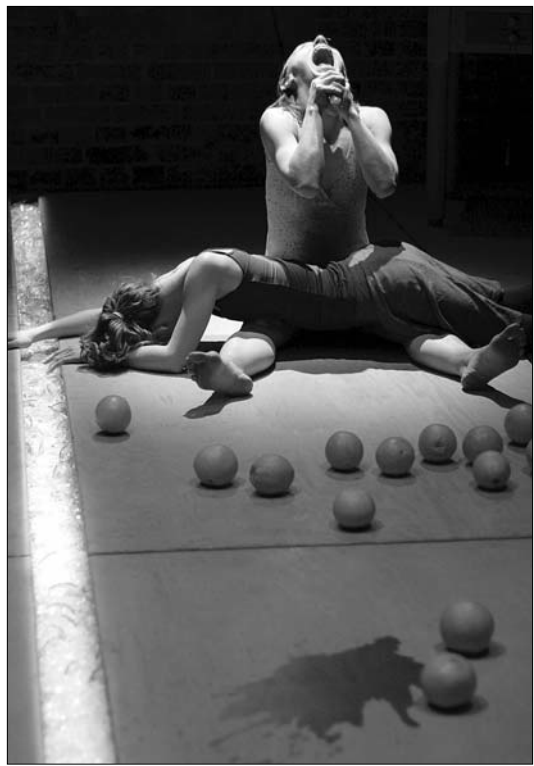
The intense hush that envelops the space suggests that numbers of listener-spectators of *Anhelli* are deeply affected by its *irmos* sequence, which, it must be noted, gathers up the concentration of energy that accumulates as the performance progresses; and this very concentration communicates itself to the audience, returning from them to the performers, thus holding it within the energy circuit. Not all succumb to it, nor

perceive it uncritically. Michael Billington, the well-known theatre critic of *The Guardian*, when writing of the whole triptych, comments on its 'limited physical vocabulary' and observes that 'there is also something strenuous about the attempt to turn theatre into surrogate religious ritual'.<sup>12</sup>

Leave aside for the moment the production's movement vocabulary, and the point of view emerging from this article that the triptych draws on both religion and ritual without needing to be a surrogate for either of them; stay, instead, with the irreducible importance of ZAR's musical heterogeneity, which, as indicated, reflects the breadth of its travels. The triptych does not, however, cover the range and number of the songs the company has learned, nor accentuate its mix of people who, although predominantly Polish at the time the triptych was prepared, were Danish, Danish-English, Slovakian, French and Italian. But then, origins, for them, are not at issue, especially because they do not intend to make 'intercultural' theatre out of anything that might identify them culturally or mark out cultural differences between the elements of their compositions. What is primary for them is to sing the songs that they cull with moral and artistic integrity, and to treat with the same integrity the type of collaborative work that they do.

### Breath

There can be no question that song is the spine of Teatr ZAR, all elements of its pieces stemming from this and relying fully on song for their co-ordination and coherence. Yet the song is initiated by breath, surging from within the body, which channels and circulates sound. It is the workings of breath that generate energy and, together, breath and energy focus the audience's attention so that, by the end of a performance, the performers and the audience are breathing as one. In this very breathing, which is perceptible and palpable, lies the unifying energy that precipitates the vibration happening not only internally within the performers' bodies, but as visceral responsiveness on the part of the listener-spectators. This can be compared



Kamila Klamut and Ditte Berkeley in the concluding scene of *Caesarian Section*. Photo: Lukasz Giza.

to the string of an instrument that vibrates near other playing strings in 'sympathy', as it were, or to glasses with water, which, their rims having been activated, shake and 'sing' in response to each other.

At the same time, the breath goes upwards and downwards in the density of sound inherent in polyphonic structures, where, in addition, overtones thicken the sonosphere. Fret describes this as a 'column of breath, a column of singing', while the Svan speak of the singing as 'a ladder' for the ascent of souls to heaven;<sup>13</sup> and Fret's 'column' image also evokes the idea of the 'vertical', that aspiration to the 'divine' fundamental to Grotowski's search. The performers group in various different ways according to how they have to listen to the harmonies they sing – thus listen to each other – and how they have to adjust their breath to project their voices according to the changing moments of their singing.

Their physically close grouping visually reflects the sense of togetherness conveyed



by their voices, and the audience is near enough to observe how one or another singer – in *Gospels*, it is often Fret – indicates with a moving hand or hands the inhalation or expiration of breath, or its prolongation or interruption. While this whole process is, in itself, an eloquent demonstration of what it means to be an ensemble, the performers' close-knit togetherness throughout their performance draws the audiences in, most likely quite subliminally. This, too, provides conditions for vibration and for 'breathing as one'.

The close proximity between performers and listener-spectators helps the process: in Wrocław audiences are usually kept to around fifty people, and, when on tour, ZAR attempts to replicate the intimate spatial configuration and small audience numbers that it enjoys at home. Nowhere is the vibratory energy more eloquent, in any part of the triptych, than in the silence when *Gospels* draws to a close. The performers leave the space, and three large wheel-candelabra that had come down close to the floor as points of an uneven triangle, one slightly higher than the next, swing and sway, their candles burning, to signify closure.

However, this is only a formal closure, since the open-endedness of the work – there, too, in the burning light and sway – is a glimpse into Mystery, of which the story of Lazarus at the heart of *Gospels* is emblematic. Nor can there be closure when the atmosphere surrounding the listener-spectators left in the performance space is one of deep contemplation. These listener-spectators sit in silence that no applause breaks, some sitting for a long time, as if in meditation, or lost in thought, or mesmerized by the pendulum swing of the candelabra and the dancing flames of light.

The event of Lazarus's resurrection is not enacted but firmly read as narrative by Maria and Marta (Kamila Klamut and Ditte Berkeley), who sit opposite each other, by candlelight, at a table with bread and wine, beneath which a pile of earth implies a grave. (Text fragments other than those from the *Gospels* of Thomas and Philip are from Dostoevsky and Simone Weil.) Earlier, in the pervasive chiaroscuro of the piece, urgent

knocking on the table, as if to awaken the dead, seems to have anticipated this moment; and drama is generated subsequently by the sudden darkness into which the space is plunged when the men sing Zar, breathing audibly with their singing and thus making breath integral to the sounds they produce. They end Zar with a pronounced inhalation-exhalation on the last, strong sound, which is not usual for the Svan, who sing it along an even breath, but was invented by ZAR during rehearsals as dramatic breath punctuation and as counterpoint to the limpid, other-worldly *Kyrie* that precedes it.

### Textures of Sound and Counterpoint

None of this is in linear sequence but in apparently disconnected fragments from which it is not always possible to construe meaning. Meaning can be guessed at, and is most successfully deduced in retrospect, as the performance develops, or simply after it ends, when people can reflect upon it. Thus the various fragments in which Klamut washes in large bowls and pails of water, and another, which alludes to giving birth, can eventually be linked to the motifs of purification and rebirth emerging and re-emerging here and there in *Gospels*. But *Gospels* does not so much seek literal meaning as atmosphere and mood – a sense of mystery that is generated by theatrical means to reach listener-spectators' 'being' – and so released, palpable energy.

Counterpoint plays a large part in *Gospels*, going from the shards of the biblical narrative to the suggested rape of a bride at her wedding – the sacred and the profane juxtaposed through separate segments. Light (candles, lanterns, spotlights, and diagonal low beams) and dark (in shifting hues with occasional blackouts) are in perpetual juxtaposition. The image of a table with tens of candles burning on it at the beginning of the production – an image of stillness, irrespective of the performers quietly scraping it – is in contrast with the moving wheels of light at the end. The performers form tableaux, which, for all their picture-like configuration, are never cases of still life: the performers are in



*Caesarian Section*. Above: Ditte Berkeley, Kamila Klamut, and Matej Matejka. Below: Ditte Berkeley and Nini Julia Bang. Photos: Lukasz Giza.



Aleksandra Kotecka and Tomasz Wierzbowski in *Anhelli: The Calling*. Photo: Irena Lipinska.

continual motion, even when their movement is slight. Small movements and gestures are in rhythmic counterpoint with each other, and in counterpoint again with more ostentatious movements.

Rhythmic counterpoint operates in a similar fashion in *Caesarian Section* and *Anhelli*. Of the three parts of the triptych, *Anhelli* is the quietest, relying for its delicate transitions of rhythm on the smallest and lightest of sounds. There is, among a range of them, the brush of the string referred to earlier – an invisible string across a door frame that, because the string is plucked, manages to suggest a harp. In fact, there are three frames, which several performers move about in the space not simply for reasons of spatial modification – the latter is necessary for choral regrouping – but, just as significantly, because the sound of moving them, although discrete, is part and parcel of the production's musical score.

There is, as well, the breath of air lightly emanating from what can only be described

as an elliptically sketched-in 'sail'. This is a white, thin canvas held up close to the ceiling by a pole that is lifted up and down, irresistibly suggesting 'rowing'. For those not familiar with Slowacki's *Anhelli* and its double journey, another trigger for the imagination is at hand. This implied journey on water may be perceived as an allusion to the crossing of the river Acheron to Hades, the abode of the dead. Slowacki's is a Christian interpretation, the Acheron a mythological one, and the two, in performance terms, are synchronized.

Whichever way listener-spectators take it – and they may take it purely on a sensory level, without any explanatory references or cultural 'hooks' – the effect is ethereal, helped by the play of spots of light that are enveloped by the white canvas and which, while illuminating it, appear to float with it. The play of light, the presence of white (also in most of the costumes), gentle motion, and the slightest of sounds capture in an abstract, extrapolated, and imagistic way, the subject – the journey of the spirit – of ZAR's *Anhelli*.

And *Anhelli* plays a sonic trick through what can be called an illusion of sound, that occurs near one of the harp/door frames. The sound of singing, in this moment, is real enough, as is that of a soft footstep, or of the swish of a belt that Klamut ties around her trench coat. But the illusion of sound in question is that of a few feathers gently falling. They fall from the hand of the Angel in the trench coat on to the chest of a man lying on the floor (Matej Matejka). Once again, the moment is cryptic. It can be deciphered via Slowacki's poem, and so the man could be Anhelli, opening his soul to receive the Angel. Or else it can be left in its opacity, allowing the senses to take the moment in.

At three different times, Przemyslaw Balszczak, who is one of the performers falling on floorboards towards the end, loudly recites several lines in Polish from *Anhelli* as well as from another poem by Slowacki, *King-Spirit (Krol-Duch, 1847)*, which deals with similarly intertwined metaphysical and political themes. These are the only spoken words in the production, which, for all its singing, is one where sound, paradoxically, heightens its silences, making it seem more silent than it actually is.

There are phrases in *Anhelli* that seem visually impenetrable, and are not always quite tuned in to its movement score to

stimulate the senses fully. This pertains especially to the middle section, which tends to rely on held positions rather than develop the movement dynamics of the piece: there is too much sitting in position and lying on the floor, for instance, which, unlike the potent, breathtaking stillness of the final scene, when five men sing flat on their backs, fails to communicate why they might be necessary; and the fact that Matejka has inexplicably tied up Berkeley with a coarse rope is of no help to the kinesics of the work. It is lapses like these that must have prompted Billington's critique of ZAR's 'limited physical vocabulary', which, while justifiably sparse when the aim is to configure stillness and silence, might well need more contrapuntal variety of movement to sustain the work's momentum and carry it through.

### Movement and *Caesarian Section*

Be this as it may, *Anhelli* echoes *Gospels*, which *Caesarian Section* with its multiple images of attempted suicide does not. *Caesarian Section* is a robust piece, despite its subject and the fact that a number of its images of suicide were inspired by the writings of Romanian-born Aglaja Veteranyi: Veteranyi took her own life at the age of forty in 2002, just as her work was beginning to be



The concluding scene of *Anhelli*. Photo: Irena Lipinska.

internationally recognized. As Lyn Gardner, dance critic of *The Guardian*, accurately observed when reviewing *Caesarian Section* as a stand-alone piece at the 2012 Edinburgh Festival: 'There is pain – but a sense, too, that these people are survivors, clinging to life with a grip that may be fragile, but which can't be loosened'.<sup>14</sup> The work received in Edinburgh, among several prizes, the Total Theatre Award for the category 'Physical/Visual Theatre'.

That *Caesarian Section* was placed in this category is not surprising, given its range of dance movement: tango-like dance to Piazzola's music (which opens the piece); dance in bare feet more or less on glass beside a thin river of small pieces of shattered glass, which is lowered slightly into the wooden floor and traverses the performance space; dance on chairs in a short section called 'Suicides' Cinema' (its quirky choreography and wry humour reminiscent of Pina Bausch); a dance with a broom (a neat way of cleaning the floor of its scattered glass splinters); and an array of duets and trios that could well be defined as 'dance' because of their pronounced bodily ebb and flow.

These last include sequences around the suicide attempts – humorous, without loss of gravity – of a woman with a huge rope tied to her neck, its other end intended to be hung from a miniature mandarin tree. Among them, too, is a series – poignant, this time, rather than humorous – of extensions made by the same woman, who pulls herself upwards as she stands precariously on a chair: her position and gestures on the 'vertical' are both an expression of despair and a call for salvation. Instrumental music or singing almost always accompanies the movement material, without, however, illustrating or duplicating it.

### The Intermix of Sources

Strongly articulated movement of this kind led Gardner to describe *Caesarian Section* as 'a memorable piece of Jerzy Grotowski-influenced Polish dance-theatre'.<sup>15</sup> Gardner's allusion to Grotowski in a dance theatre context might be unexpected, although it is not necessarily out of the ordinary in the

context of ZAR. ZAR, if primarily song theatre, as argued in this article, can more than tolerate other descriptions because of its hybridity, its intermix of genres: song, instrumental playing, sound composition, dance, movement (broadly speaking), visual art effects, verbal texts, speech, mime, and, of course, the interface between sacred and secular knowledge and so between the diverse cultural sources from which come diverse knowledge made flesh.

Some of the dance noted above was devised collectively with the choreographer Vivien Wood. Movement, more generally speaking, arose from the performers' ear for sound and its relation to the sound patterns of the instruments being played and, above all, to their singing. Thus the big sound of empty glasses being smashed in the dark, one after the other, before the music by Piazzola begins, is an overture, with brio, to the smaller, but also powerful fall of this or that glass of wine pushed by the foot of each cellist (two of them). Fall and smash – repeated sounds at precisely timed intervals – anticipate repeated climbing and falling movements, although none are in tandem; and these movements also make sounds.

A woman's continual running in a wide circle is, in the same way, a sound composition, all the more so because the variety of sounds of her accentuated run – their variety depending on the changing weight of her feet – is added to by changes of step in the run – hopping, for instance, when she tries to take off her underpants. Perhaps her incongruent gesture of undressing is linked to her failed suicide attempts, but the force and resilience of her run surges from the piece.

Slapping and tapping on tables and floor contribute to the triptych's sonic texture. Even the spill of wine is meant to be sound. Fret chose the wine with great care for its consistency so that its spilling sound could be heard – or half heard, or illusorily heard, like the feathers in *Anhelli*;<sup>16</sup> and, it might as well be noted, its movement does not spread too far, thereby not causing anxiety in the listener-spectators about where the wine will go. Attention, then, is not distracted. Another fine sound is the trickle of small fragments



*Anhelli*. From left to right, Aleksandra Kotecka, Przemyslaw Blaszczak, Jean-Francois Favreaux, Ditte Berkeley, and Matej Matejka. Photo: Irena Lipinska.

of glass falling, like tears, from a dancing woman's face (Berkeley).

The concluding scene, a duet between Klamut and Berkeley, involves bright oranges, their colour as striking in its vibrancy as the scene's comic edge in a decidedly unfunny situation. The oranges break out of a transparent plastic bag and roll at different moments and different speeds, but, like the wine, not too far from the performers. Klamut sits, her legs spread wide, while Berkeley's body lies across them, her face downwards. The sound of rolling, although soft, is unmistakable. Klamut's various attempts for her character to smother herself to death with the plastic bag fail. Berkeley's face is up against the river of glass, and is sometimes half in it, depending on the performance – this highlighting danger, again, as did her dancing on glass previously. In what is meant to be a catatonic state, Klamut opens her mouth in a silent scream.

The silent scream – silence is as integral to the sound score of *Caesarean Section* as to the rest of the triptych – is the scream of intense, insufferable pain; and in this riveting image of suffering humanity can be felt the compas-

sion that the work embodies in its different facets. Suffering is unavoidable in the journey of life, and perhaps the triptych says as much by ending *Anhelli* with its prayer. Teatr ZAR may well be an example of a theatre whose hybrid form is totally characteristic of contemporary performance; but its impetus to probe the 'spirit' – the unknown, or that which is known only with great difficulty – is uncharacteristic of the field. Although not entirely so: several exceptions come into view, saliently, including Romeo Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2011), which, contrary to the defilement of the face of Jesus that takes place in full view of the audience, observes with mercy – this through the care of a son for his father suffering from dysentery – the travails of the 'human form divine' (only William Blake's phrase is here adequate).

Peter Sellars, too, appears on the horizon with his staging of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in 2010, first at the Salzburg Easter Festival and then, in the same year, with the Berliner Philharmoniker, directed by Simon Rattle. Sellars defines his staging as 'ritualization' because 'It's not theatre. It is a prayer, it is a

meditation';<sup>17</sup> and his staging, thus conceived, brings to the fore Jesus of Nazareth, the human being, much, indeed, as Bach had already done in a towering musical score that celebrated Jesus the Son of God, even as it mourned the man. Teatr ZAR's triptych, while nowhere near the scale of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, is somewhere within its great radar, meditating, as well, on humanity.

Of course, where Sellars worked on a pre-existing score, adding stylized, figurative movement to it (hence 'ritualization'), Fret, together with his collaborators, constructed their musical score, developing their movement score with it. Yet, while questions of form can be resolved, what can be concluded about ZAR's triptych when its subject matter is so difficult to discuss? How, indeed, does one verbalize 'spirit'? ZAR, by singing, suggest that the 'spirit' is best served by singing. And the triptych, it is possible to say, suggests that journeying within and upwards is necessary to glimpse what it is to be human, in grief as well as in light, so that human beings can find a way of living in the brutal, merciless world of their making.

## Notes and References

To the memory of my brother Peter.

My heartfelt thanks to Teatr ZAR for their welcoming hospitality, especially to Jaroslaw Fret and Kamila Klamut; and to Magdalena Madra, who, with her usual affection, kindness, and efficiency, also helped me to track down some indispensable information, including photographs.

1. See Grotowski's 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle', in Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 121 and p. 124–6.

2. *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 34–9, p. 41, and p. 43.

3. Scholars generally agree on these 'stages' of Grotowski's work, and essays are grouped usefully around them in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (London: Routledge, 1997). His 'Theatre of Sources' reflects on ecstatic practices, which belong to what he broadly calls 'traditional techniques' (p. 252–80).

4. Only these briefest of remarks are possible in the restricted space of this article. For a more detailed account of what I identify as the three generations related, directly or indirectly, to the work of Grotowski, see the relevant section of Chapter 7 in Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova, *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre*

*Directing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 229–52.

5. For a concise account of Polish Romanticism, see Harold B. Segal's 'Introduction' to his *Polish Romantic Drama* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), p. 1–43. See also Norman Davies, *God's Playground: a History of Poland: 1795 to the Present*, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 25–41.

6. Jaroslaw Fret, unpublished interview with the author, 3 July 2010.

7. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1991.

8. *The Beginnings of Christianity*, p. 43, p. 95, p. 104–7, p. 174–80, p. 194–5.

9. Recorded on a non-catalogued audiotape dated 22 July 2002, held in the ZAR archive, Grotowski Institute, Wrocław.

10. Recorded on non-catalogued videocassettes marked 'Georgia', 2008, held in the ZAR archive.

The group formed in 2006, which created *Caesarian Section* and *Anhelli* and has performed the triptych ever since, consists (with two additions, who did not create the two works cited) of: Nini Julia Bang, Ditte Berkeley, Przemyslaw Blaszcak, Tomasz Bojarski, Emma Bonnici (2009), Alessandro Curti (2009), Jean-François Favreau, Jaroslaw Fret, Aleksandra Kotejka, Kamila Klamut, Matej Matejka, Ewa Pasikowska, Tomasz Wierzbowski.

11. The project, leading to the performance piece *Armine, Sister* has been in process for at least three years (here not counting Fret's sustained interest in Armenian liturgy). It has entailed various expeditions to Istanbul and Anatolia in Turkey (the last, involving most of the company, in July 2012), to which intensive work with master singers of two Armenian churches in Istanbul was central. Several workshops, public study days, and concert presentations have been an integral part of the process, notably in the programme *voicEncounters* at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław in November 2012. They are to be followed by a series of meetings in Warsaw in March 2013 in remembrance of the Armenian genocide, together with a concert by ZAR.

Another concert of work-in-progress and seminars under the rubric of *voicEncounters* will take place at the Grotowski Institute in May 2013, followed by more presentations in September. The premiere of *Armine, Sister* is planned for November 2013 in Wrocław as part of a broader programme showcasing Armenian and Iranian musicians, a major photographic exhibition, films, seminars, and a conference. The whole is envisaged as a celebration of the tenth anniversary of Teatr ZAR.

12. *The Guardian*, 29 September 2009, on performances at St Giles Church and the Barbican Pit hosted by the Barbican Theatre Centre in London. For a fine study of earlier, pre-2008 performances of *Gospels of Childhood* in Brzezinka, where Grotowski conducted his Paratheatrical research in the 1970s, see Dariusz Kosinski, 'Songs from Beyond the Dark', *Performance Research*, XIII, No. 2 (2008), p. 60–75.

13. Unpublished interview, 3 July 2010.

14. *The Guardian*, 16 August 2012.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Fret's reference to the consistency of the wine is in the author's unpublished interview with him of 10 December 2010.

17. Quoted in the notes accompanying the live recording of one of three performances in Berlin on the DVD made for the Berliner Philharmoniker's Digital Concert Hall, 2010.