

Octavian Saiu

Hong Kong Metropolitan University (HK)

Theatrical Timelessness in Teatr ZAR's Creative Journey

Abstract

This article is devoted to Teatr ZAR and its creative journey, which includes rehearsals in the heart of Wrocław, field work in the Georgian village of Svaneti, and performances presented around the world. It explains the key dimensions of the company's vision and focuses on ZAR's major creations—from *The Triptych* to their most recent experiment, *The Maids – Materials*. It also establishes certain elements of continuity between Grotowski's quest for a poor and pure theatre and Jarosław

Fret's constant search for a theatre of sound and presence. It seeks to affirm ZAR's body of work as a link between this much revered Grotowskian legacy and the landscape of twenty-first century theatricality. Through this process of aesthetic, cultural and historical contextualization, it explores ZAR's uniqueness in the field of contemporary anthropological performance.

Keywords

ZAR, Jerzy Grotowski, Jarosław Fret, poor theatre, anthropological theatre, presence, memory

Abstrakt

Teatralna ponadczasowość w twórczej podróży Teatru ZAR

Artykuł poświęcony jest Teatrowi ZAR i jego twórczej podróży, na którą składają się próby w sercu Wrocławia, praca w terenie w gruzińskiej wiosce Swanetia oraz występy na całym świecie. Wyjaśniając kluczowe wymiary wizji zespołu, tekst skupia się na głównych kreacjach ZARU – od *Tryptyku* po najnowszy eksperyment, *Materiały do Pokojówek*. Wskazuje również na pewne elementy ciągłości między dążeniem do teatru ubożego i czystego u Grotowskiego a nieustannym poszukiwaniem teatru dźwięku i obecności w twórczości Jarosława Freta. Twórczość Teatru ZAR stanowi ogniwo łączące spuściznę Grotowskiego z krajobrazem praktyk teatralnych XXI wieku. Autor, dzięki odwołaniu się do kontekstów estetycznych, kulturowych i historycznych udowadnia, że ZAR jest grupą wyjątkową na polu współczesnego performansu antropologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe

ZAR, Jerzy Grotowski, Jarosław Fret, teatr ubogi, teatr antropologiczny, obecność, pamięć

The Ancestry of ZAR

ZAR is a company of a rare sort. Theatre is not the ideal term for its cultural definition, yet is a part of it, hence the group's official title: Teatr ZAR. It is perhaps the other term that merits a more detailed clarification, since it is rather obscure. Originating in the rural areas of Georgia, *zār* is a form of funeral singing that predates modern civilization, a specific mixture of archaic tonalities and deep incantations, a largely inaccessible acoustic heritage that has been given too little attention by musicologists and practitioners alike.¹

The company is based in the iconic city of Wrocław, where Grotowski's legacy is still alive. This is not by accident or even serendipity. In fact, the artistic director and founder of ZAR, Jarosław Fret, is the director of the Grotowski Institute—a connection more profound than it may seem. Like the master in search of poor theatre, whose experimental work revolutionized the stage of Europe in the sixties, Fret has also been searching for the essence of the *encounter*.² He also relies upon sound as a medium of performative expression. He is also intensely preoccupied with the body, with presence, with the energy of being there. His journey took him away from Western patterns of performance, and that trajectory is celebrated by the very name of his troupe. ZAR means far more than the exoticism of a word with unusual resonance. It means the assumed value of that which remains different from everything in the mainstream tradition of the European stage.

In *zār*, the sound and its articulation depend upon the principles of the sacred, radically opposed to the trends of worldly entertainment. The act of singing is a ritual of communion, not merely a practice of communication. This distinction is crucial for any genuine understanding of the eponymous company sheltered these days by the Grotowski Institute. Its leader and its members do not seek the gratification derived from any form of public recognition. They do not expect the usual indulgences of the theatrical world. They simply create because they are together. In fact, they create in order to be together. That sense of attachment transcends the prerequisites of their work, in the same way that the Laboratory Theatre established by Grotowski never functioned as

¹ The idea of recovering cultural memory has been central to Fret's creative universe. See Jarosław Fret, "Towards Anamnestic Art," *Performance Research* 25, no. 6/7 (2020): 165–174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1909927>.

² This concept is central to the Grotowskian definition of theatre, as the essence of communication through and beyond the stage. See Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002).

a typical company of thespians. It is the main reason why to assimilate them to the category of musical theatre would be not only misleading, but completely inappropriate. Since music is the foundational element of their creation and theatre one of its essential dimensions, the temptation to merge them in such a characterization is great. However, it is not the right way to describe them. So, then, what is Teatr ZAR?

Above any immediate classification, beyond the criteria that one could employ in order to formulate an answer, it must be said that the most important virtues of this group affirm a sense of uniqueness. Based on an almost lost tradition of singing, articulated through the key principles of anthropological performance, centered around the vibrations of the human body in space, Teatr ZAR does not claim an avant-garde status. It simply defies canons of reception in both theatricality and musicality.

The Triptych as a Search for the Unknown

The emblematic ZAR production remains *The Triptych*, a piece dedicated to the ritual of being, in which the human voice and the physical gesture complete each other. It is, explicitly and declaredly, a continuation of the Grotowskian path.³ It addresses some of the most fundamental themes of existence, from birth to death, in a manner so barren that it may seem unsuited for the stage. Indeed, it is not meant for the stage, for the usual perimeter of performance under bright spotlights. It functions better off the stage, in nature, in old, dilapidated buildings, in abandoned churches, in any place not yet conquered by theatre. Divided, as the title implies, into three different chapters, the work explores how the body is the vehicle of expression and the instrument of communication insofar as it carries the messages of music. In *The Triptych*, music is the core of everything, and remains the most essential dimension even when the movement generates its own visual substance. Usually, for artists preoccupied with how sound brings performers and audiences together beyond borders, the music follows, deriving from *presence*. For ZAR, it is precisely the other way around.

Engaged in a study of ancient Christian melody on the edge of Europe, Fret discovered a type of music that he turned into the source of his creative language.

³ Some scenes are directly borrowed from Grotowski's shows, as a tribute to the master. This affinity, however, is at times denied by Fret himself. He is also used to classifying his theatre in a way that is at once accessible and simplistic. See Laura Molzahn, "Teatr Zar's Unholy Mystery Play: Polish Troupe Brings *The Gospels of Childhood Triptych* to the MCA," *Chicago Reader*, March 28, 2012, <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/teatr-zars-unholy-mystery-play/>.

PHOTO IRENA LIPÍŃSKA



Anheli: The Calling, third part of *The Triptych*, directed by Jarosław Fret, performance by Teatr ZAR, prem. 2009

He did not model the manifestations of that language upon the music. Nor did he try to match gestures and tonalities.

He delved deeper and deeper into the nucleus of sound, and from there he extracted the message, the medium and also the meaning of his entire performance. The subject matter differs in the three parts—from the story of an unknown gospel to the canonized poem of Juliusz Słowacki, *Anheli*. The rhythm changes. The images include material objects: a huge white cloth, a door frame, wooden tables and chairs. Yet nothing is more important for the theatrical narrative than the sound of ancestral music reverberating in the air. That music tells its own story, and everything else is a reflection of it in time and space. Therefore, the mission of each performer is to create a link, a connection—through time and space—between the sacred origin of sound and contemporary humanity in Europe, America, or Asia.

Understood this way, the language of ZAR is not a theatrical idiom. Despite the fact that it requires the discipline and dedication of the artists involved,

despite its utter reliance upon how their universe and that of the audience come together, and despite the very name of the group and its participation in numerous festivals, the experience of *The Triptych* at best exceeds and at least contradicts all the expectations of those who enter its realm thinking that they will be attending a theatre show. Some of those spectators cannot accept the alternative. They reject the challenge. Some are confused. Those, however, who allow themselves to be part of it realize immediately that they are not invited to watch and listen, but to be there, and by being there to certify a spiritual experience.⁴

The idea of having an experience—as opposed to watching, listening to, and enjoying a performance—remains the key. It is in this sense that Fret is truly close to his glorious predecessor, and *The Triptych* has affirmed their affinity so clearly. For Grotowski, theatre was not the text or the performance, the message or the meaning, the body or the sound. It was the pure act of being there and partaking in an experience. His well-known search for the core of theatricality, which he beautifully and memorably defined as the *encounter* between the performer and the spectator, was marked by the obsession with poverty for that reason. He wanted to ensure the validity of the experience, unobstructed and unhindered by any superfluous accessory. His was an art of ontological essentialization, not merely of aesthetic clarity—the distinction being important because it highlights the value of presence. The body, the sound, the meaning, and the message lead to, and at the same time emerge from presence. The form and even the content of his legendary *The Constant Prince* were only significant because they were the beginning and the end of that experience, as any careful analysis of the piece would reveal.⁵

Following this Grotowskian principle, understanding it as a creative imperative, Fret shaped *The Triptych* as more than a performance to be watched and listened to. He wanted it to be, purely so, an experience.

Regarded this way, his work was not about chanting as storytelling or storytelling as chanting. It was about how the sound could be the source of the encounter for those prepared to let themselves be carried away by its resonance. Like Grotowski's quest, this was a mystical process, and the fact that *zâr* is primarily a religious type of music is not a mere detail in the genetic history of the

⁴ This sense of “embodied memory” is one of the essential links between Grotowski and Fret. See Dominika Laster, “Embodied Memory: Body-Memory in the Performance Research of Jerzy Grotowski,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2012): 211–229, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X12000413>.

⁵ The pictures, more so than the footage, display that sense of presence as the centerpiece of everything in Grotowski's *The Constant Prince*.

PHOTO IRENA LIPÍŃSKA



Caesarean section: Essays on Suicide, second part of *The Triptych*, directed by Jarosław Fret, performance by Teatr ZAR, prem. 2007

company that uses the word as the symbol of its identity. *The Triptych* required the spectators to be either *in* or *out*, to accept the pact of the experience or to steer away from it, to make a choice that was above the gesture of purchasing a performance ticket. In certain circumstances, spectators were scrutinized by the gaze of the master who wanted them to be there at a certain level of intensity. In this day and age, such a radical gesture would be deemed narcissistically abusive. No artist would escape the avalanche of criticism unleashed upon them by the anonymous, amorphous crowd of various online platforms. So, subtly and less drastically, Fret introduced his spectators into the atmosphere of his show through sound, allowing them to realize that what followed was not theatre or music or musical theatre, but something that transcended all such genres into a mystical adventure for which no one was ready, but for which some were preparing themselves. The code of Teatr ZAR was revealing itself through its constitutive elements, as if inviting everyone to notice from the very beginning that they were not similar in any way to the typical vocabulary of performance—whether theatrical, musical or both.

Armine, Sister and the “Witness Action”

Another landmark of ZAR’s history of already two decades was *Armine, Sister*. The same sense of participation, above and beyond watching and listening, was at the heart of that show. Even more so than in the case of *The Triptych*, the responsibility bestowed upon the spectators became compelling as it turned each of them into a witness. The meaning of the singular form is decisive in discussing the phenomenon: every spectator had the mission of being a witness, without being diluted, dissipated into the shapeless notion of an “audience.” For Fret, the latter is an elusive and perilous idea, which assimilates the individual into a group and thus annihilates her or his personal experience. It is worth noting that, again, he is following in the footsteps of Grotowski himself, and never employs the term “audience” in any of his statements. Brecht’s aspiration towards a similar segregation of viewers was based upon very different criteria, and thus justified through completely different arguments, mainly of an ideological nature. He feared exactly what his damned contemporary, Artaud, considered the basis of the theatrical venture: the communion between all its entities, actors and audiences alike.⁶ Grotowski, embracing Artaud’s pathos, distinguished himself from all the cruelty of such an attempt and insisted that only the spectator alone and the performer alone can form the microcosm of the *encounter*. Nowadays, Fret agrees.

Consequently, when he created *Armine, Sister*, he drew upon the legacy of his precursor in conjugating the *encounter* in the singular form. The entire destiny of the Armenian population wiped out in Anatolia in 1916 was now the story of a single human being who reflected it in her own suffering: a nun who was raped, tortured, and eventually killed. By implication, no spectator could hide behind the conventional façade of the audience. Each of them had to accept the act of watching, listening, being, as well as—ultimately and more importantly—witnessing. Without having been in Anatolia when the atrocities of that war took place, not being afforded direct access to the chronicles of pain, far from the accounts of the survivors, the spectator could be what Adorno would call an “imaginary witness.”⁷ Through performance, through an experience of sound, body, and space, *Armine* constructed a place of memory guided by the ethics of witnessing. The group Teatr ZAR designated a single performer to carry out that mission. Everyone else was there to underscore and support her presence

⁶ See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

⁷ See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

through gestures and voices, and movement and silence. Yet the story was hers, and everything Armine was sharing through her body was meant to reach each of the witnesses directly and singularly. There were no words, because none was needed. The show unfolded through a precise and clear succession of performative sequences, tableaux of suffering that would take one through the torment of a displaced and extinguished community, whose only chance of telling its story was now that of triggering a response from the conscience of the witness. The uncountable faceless victims appeared on stage, represented by the same being, embodied by that being.

The set of *Armine* was meant to recreate the memory of the genocide but also the degradation of that memory, the constant and unstoppable erosion of all its traces: wooden columns which would gradually disintegrate so that from inside sand could leak out through every fracture. The image was not only a visual metaphor, but a symbol of a different kind. When leaving the space of the performance, walking past the body of the victim—as the dead Armine was still there as a haunting reminder of her own suffering—the spectators had to step onto that sand. They left the traces of their steps there, and for that moment in time all of them were sharing that story, witnesses and participants at once. Something else, no less poignant, was happening at the end of *Armine, Sister*. It challenged the prerequisites of spectatorship in a way that was as direct, as visceral as the experience of being there throughout the performance itself. After the series of tragic episodes through which the character goes in silence, accompanied by the mystical tonalities of original Armenian music interpreted by the choir of Aram Kevopyan, the end brought no catharsis. There seemed to be no end. Armine's death was the last chapter of a tragedy that could not be over because it had never been known as such. It was not witnessed in the definitive sense of the word. And then, the great miracle of true presence happened: no spectator could do what was expected of any possible audience. No one could applaud. In a silence amplified by the sand pouring out of the columns, one by one the spectators left, inscribing their traces into that sand. The cycle of witnessing was then complete.⁸

Armine was for Fret an *ars poetica*, a creation that captures his ethical beliefs and his creative practices, his vision and his sensitivity. For ZAR, it was a milestone that confirmed the group's spiritual vocation. Few shows depicting human suffering had had the power of stating the truth so clearly and so poetically, without

⁸ For a more detailed insight, see Octavian Saiu, "Teatr Zar's *Armine, Sister*: Watching as Witnessing and Criticism as Testimony," International Association of Theatre Critics Hong Kong website, November 25, 2015, <https://www.iatc.com.hk/doc/76452>.

becoming formulaic, pretentious, militant, politicized, or pathetic. Facing each other, as the configuration of the space required that they were seated along both edges of the performance space, the spectators understood and perhaps even felt the pain of others at a personal level. At least once, Fret was able to offer his own version of the *encounter* in an experience that turned theatre, performance, and music into a profound experience of otherness.

Medea and the Contemporary Crisis of Europe

What followed was another exploration of pain, this time not rooted in the past but closely attuned to contemporary times, inspired by the daily landscape of Europe. *Medea, On Getting Across* was not even remotely an adaptation of the classical Greek tragedy, but a meditation on its core theme: rejection. Medea's abandonment became the catalyst for all the untold stories of all those refugees who cross the Mediterranean risking everything and facing utter rejection once they reach the shore.

Armine was about the past, about a historical crime committed more than a century before, yet never acknowledged and rarely spoken about. ZAR's *Medea* was about the present, about that present which everyone knew, but few had the courage to confront. As the Mediterranean may be the largest graveyard in recent times, the condition of the unknown people who cross it in search of new horizons remains a most uncomfortable topic. Governments, nations, and individuals seem to prefer to ignore it, rather than address it directly, unless they have no choice. The question of choice and the intricacy of its motivations was the basis of *Medea, On Getting Across*—a performance centered around the solitary being of a woman trying to survive in the face of all hurdles, accompanied by the music of another world. It was the music sung by women from Egypt and Turkey, with incantations and intonations that charged the atmosphere of the show with a pervasive sense of the uncanny. Fret was bringing the darkness of history into the light of the theatre: *Medea* was literally a dark show. It was so dimly lit that every spectator could witness the immense sorrow of the character's journey into the unknown. At the end, a thick layer of cold fog would cover the area through which one had to go in order to leave the space of the performance, and this was far more than an aesthetic gimmick or, even more so, than the aesthetic of the gimmick. It was the symbol of uncertainty and disorientation that matched and completed the narrative at the heart of the show itself.

For those who were there, it was obvious that they were not invited to watch and listen to a theatrical script unfolding from the beginning to the end, but

to witness the destiny of an entire category of people. Everything displayed on the small or large screen by the sensationalist media industry, every shocking headline or mere background noise about refugees who died while trying to get across the sea, became tangible, real. Witnessing was possible thanks to a process of concentrated presence that required ethical awareness, sensitivity, and reason to the same degree. To condemn the unnecessary loss of so many lives would be a simple human response. To feel sorry for them would seem no more and no less than a predictable impulse of the heart. To understand that the entire crisis could, and should be avoided would follow as a principle of rational thinking. The fact that all those dimensions were engaged at the same time made the act of spectatorship an experience of complete witnessing. That was the paradoxical message of *Medea* as an elegy of lost humanity and, simultaneously, as an affirmation of theatre's unique power to transform the hearts and the minds of its spectators. Without doubt, it was a tragic tale. And yet, something about the death of its disempowered, rejected character carried a meaning beyond the sadness of its ending. *Medea's* death was a sacrifice, meant to remind every spectator that it may not have been too late to act in order to prevent more and more sacrifices.

Celebrating Human Diversity

The principle of acting and the act of witnessing seem contradictory, irreconcilable. To witness means to register the actions of others, rather than being invested in the action itself. Yet, for Fret, the two may be fused into the notion of spectatorship or, rather, spectatorship in his definition is a solid blend of the two. Inspired by Grotowski's text "Performer," he stresses the correlation between the two hemispheres of theatre through what they each maintain at their core: presence.⁹ Very close to what is happening in each show, part of the same performative space, the spectators of ZAR's *Triptych*, of *Armine*, and of *Medea* achieve the same sense of enlightened presence. "Witness action," Fret calls it: a notion that he launched in the context of the Theatre Olympics in Wrocław 2016, part of the larger program of festivities hosted by the city that was then the European Capital of Culture. Seemingly in contradiction with the celebratory calendar of events, The Theatre Olympics borrowed its motto

⁹ See Jerzy Grotowski, "Performer," trans. Thomas Richards, in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner (London: Routledge, 2017), 376–380.

from—who else?—Grotowski: “The world as a place of truth.”¹⁰ It was a key moment for ZAR, as it was featured together with some of the most important companies of European theatre and alongside artists such as Robert Wilson, Romeo Castellucci, Valery Fokin, etc.

In 2016, ZAR was recognized for its ambitious style, for its distinct modes of stage creation, but above all for its deep engagement with issues that went beyond the general patterns of anthropological performance. Fret’s universe stays connected with the present and becomes contemporary despite its impetus towards the archaic. It is part of the world it seeks to reflect. Parallels with other companies can be drawn, and influences can be traced to a certain tradition of performance that reached its most exemplary manifestation in the roaring sixties, in the same town of Wrocław. Still, ZAR is not merely an offspring of that tradition of Laboratory Theatre, and Fret is not its disciple.

Part of a certain cultural landscape, in which other artists and companies coexist because they share the same spiritual beliefs and similar performative practices, ZAR is only true to itself. It does not abandon its avowed allegiance to the Grotowskian heritage, but it revitalizes it by placing it in a constant dialogue with the present. “Witness action” was born out of this unique philosophy of performance that brings together influences from great precursors and the intense vibrations of contemporary existence. It had another sort of mixture at its core, however.

ZAR consists of people from different parts of the world, from different ethnic and geographic backgrounds, with different skin colors and life stories. This sense of variety does not derive from any obsession with human diversity. It does not attest a global or universalist vocation per se. It is simply a reflection of a certain creative mentality that is based on cultural heterogeneity, which is far more meaningful than hybridity, however defined. The latter term implies a concoction of identities generated by often unnatural circumstances. The former captures the complexity of human nature, which allows for the greatest variation within the same spectrum. Therefore, the need to bring together people from Egypt, Turkey, Singapore, Japan, Haiti, and many other places is a spiritual necessity for Fret. It is also a celebration of various traditions that together can attest the same principle of continuity through sound, voice, and movement. Ultimately, through the very presence of the human body.

Again, the episode of the 2016 Theatre Olympics must be evoked, as it captures the greatness of this multicultural range. One of the highlights of the program

¹⁰ See Theatre Olympics website, <http://www.theatreolympics2016.pl/en>, accessed February 28, 2024.

curated by Fret was the Dziady Festival, a selection of performances based not only on Adam Mickiewicz's classical text, but on the very concept of celebrating the dead. There were indeed many stage versions of the play, including a fourteen-hour-long one, which challenged the endurance of those inclined to watch it. Even that was somewhat expected or even predictable. A different dimension of the Dziady Festival was utterly surprising, as it involved manifestations dedicated to the souls of the dead from Haiti and Brasil. Voodoo and Candomblé rituals were presented to spectators from all over the world alongside Eimuntas Nekrošius's extremely short version of *Dziady* and the painfully long one created by Michał Zadara. That was the triumph of a vision irreducible to the confines of European civilization. It was the most appropriate affirmation of a belief that links Fret's contemporary perspective on performance to Grotowski's ecumenic understanding of it in the sixties.¹¹ It is undeniable that without his direct contact with the Indian universe of spirituality and philosophy, his search for a poor theatre would never have had the same vigor.

For ZAR, its conglomerate of human identities is thus a most appropriate expression of a spiritual conviction that is more important than the conventional notion of cultural diversity. From the discovery of primeval sonorities in a remote village in Georgia to a constant fascination with old rituals from the Americas, this journey has been one of discovery and self-discovery, between a Polish identity rooted in a rich history and all the possible varieties of otherness. Few other companies have been so intensely and persistently dedicated to such a project, which blurs all boundaries and creates a true, genuine spirit of togetherness and communion. All the performers of ZAR speak the same language, while still speaking their own. That common language is not an acquired vocabulary, but a rich and complex universe of sound that brings them closer to each other and to spectators as diverse as they themselves are.

ZAR's 2023 Anniversary as Herstory

This project reached a climax in 2023, through a show that is as unusual for the general landscape of contemporary performance as it is suitable for the ongoing program of ZAR as a creative entity, *The Maids* (French, *Les Bonnes*). *The Maids* is, undoubtedly, Genet's most famous work, a piece of drama that has been read and staged all over the world. No one knew better how it should be staged than

¹¹ The idea of making theatre "out of death" is explored by Dariusz Kosiński, "Teatr ZAR: Theatre Out of Death," *TDR: The Drama Review* 64, no. 1 (2020): 62–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00896.



PHOTO HENRI CHARLES

The Maids – Materials, directed by Jarosław Fret,
production The Grotowski Institute and Studio
Wachowich/Fret, prem. 2023

Genet himself, whose notes have served as both an incentive and a deterrent for various directors who have approached it.¹² Ritualistic in its tone and psychoanalytical in its substance, *The Maids* is a brutal exploration of humanity. Closer to Artaud than to Beckett or Ionesco, Genet remains the clearest example of how the so-called theatre of the absurd relates to the unknown legacy of the theatre of cruelty. For Fret, his play served as a pretext more than a text. It presented him with the possibilities of a complex cast, inspired by the play only in terms of general typologies, but changing its basic terms in order to express emotional pains that are both ancient and contemporary. He relied upon a group of seven female actors from countries such as Poland, the UK, Italy, Russia, Haiti, and Singapore, and they were invited to form pairs that would reflect the central couple in Genet's drama. They were not meant to play the characters from *The Maids*, but to be themselves and those characters, representing prototypes of femininity, of humanity, to which every spectator could somehow relate.

Fragmented and reconfigured, deconstructed and reconstructed, Genet's original became the basis for an entire process that sought to explore the nature

¹² See Jean Genet, "Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*," in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 265–270.

PHOTO HENRI CHARLES



The Maids – Materials, directed by Jarosław Fret, production The Grotowski Institute and Studio Wachowich/Fret, prem. 2023

of human dynamics—in both a private and public context, but also at a personal and at a collective level. It is worth noting that the name of the performance, inspired by Heiner Müller's famed adaptation of ancient tragedy (*Meadeamaterial*), is *The Maids – Materials*. The two maids, Claire and Solange, are no longer the women enthralled, obsessed with the madame, engaging in dangerous rituals and ambiguous role-playing. They are women ready to unveil their own subconscious desires through an uncompromising dialogue with each other and the spectators. *The Maids*—it must be said—is ZAR's most recent production and the first one in a rather long time. It is therefore safe to assume that it allowed for a gestation period through which the seven actresses had the time to get to know one another. The visual setting of the performance facilitates this process in a most striking way: the set consists of a large black pool of water in the immediate proximity of the spectators. The entire series of physical actions take place inside that pool, which is only about twenty centimeters deep, but has the role of creating a unifying element for all the seven women to belong to. As Bachelard would say, the water in ZAR's version of *The Maids* is a mirror and a *mise-en-abyme*.¹³ It is a primordial element of existence and a reminder of death, at the same time. It is both a neutral background for the most pregnant expressiveness of the body and a vital actant in the story, to the same degree. It is metaphor and reality, in the same way.

With this work, Fret has proved that his maturity as an artist is beyond doubt. He has integrated all the essential particulars of ZAR as a cultural phenomenon

¹³ See Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1999).

into a coherent and organic experience of togetherness, which the spectators are invited to witness. Witnessing itself, however, has the resonance of all the previous definitions attempted through *Armine* or *Medea*. Together with them, *The Maids* forms another triptych of spiritual performativity. It connects the ancestral heritage of Europe with its more recent past, with the purpose of questioning the immediate present. The body is the channel that makes this synthesis possible. These days, when the notion of gender is constantly relativized, the fact that a male director celebrates the transcendent virtues of the female body so explicitly may appear problematic. Yet, for all the spectators who have actually watched, listened to, and ultimately witnessed all these performances, it is obvious that no imposition of authority has troubled the balance of their constitutive elements. The actors/actresses involved are free. They feel free. They exhibit that freedom through every movement and every gesture. In this sense, more than in the choice of the thematic content or pattern of expression, Fret has demonstrated the above-mentioned level of creative maturity: while being an ensemble-cast production, *The Maids* provides the canvas upon which each performer can tell her own story. It is no longer Genet's play and history. It is, truly, her story. In fact, herstory.

This unlikely combination of identities, between French dramatic characters written decades ago and the embodied human universes of their interpreters, is the trademark of ZAR as a company that refuses the classical styles of adaptation and does not embrace the newly fashionable modes of storytelling. Fret prefers to create the space—literally—and the context—figuratively—in which the actresses can be themselves while also being the characters they play. This is the paradox of a type of performativity that defies the norms of what theatre is or, rather, of what theatre is supposed to be.

Neither drama, nor performance art, neither staging, nor *ex-nihilo* creation, *The Maids* is a most revealing example of how ZAR exists. In Wrocław, in a place where Grotowski's footprints can still be traced, it keeps his dreams alive. It adds more dimensions. It links them with the paths of other artists, from other genres and other places. It aspires towards universality while never losing sight of its inherent belonging to Polish culture. It is old, twenty years old, but also new. It is a dream that has become reality. Or, perhaps, a reality reminiscent of a dream.



Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Translated by Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1999.
- Fret, Jarosław. "Towards Anamnestic Art." *Performance Research* 25, no. 6/7 (2020): 165–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1909927>.
- Genet, Jean. "Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*." In *Œuvres complètes*, volume 4, 265–270. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.
- Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Edited by Eugenio Barba. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Kosiński, Dariusz. "Teatr ZAR: Theatre Out of Death." *TDR: The Drama Review* 64, no. 1 (2020): 62–87. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00896.
- Laster, Dominika. "Embodied Memory: Body-Memory in the Performance Research of Jerzy Grotowski." *New Theatre Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2012): 211–229. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X12000413>.
- Saiu, Octavian. "Teatr Zar's *Armine, Sister*: Watching as Witnessing and Criticism as Testimony." International Association of Theatre Critics Hong Kong website, November 25, 2015. <https://www.iatc.com.hk/doc/76452>.
- Wolford, Lisa, and Richard Schechner, eds. *The Grotowski Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 2013.

OCTAVIAN SAIU

Professor at Hong Kong Metropolitan University and PhD Research Professor in the Doctoral School of Sibiu University, Romania. He holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from the National University of Theatre and Film (NUTF) in Romania, a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Otago in New Zealand, and Habilitation (Higher Doctorate) in Theatre and Performing Arts. He is a scholar as well as a professional cultural and academic consultant. He serves as the President of the International Association of Theatre Leaders (IATL).