

Just a Cry

Jarosław Fret interviewed by Tadeusz Kornaś

What was the source of the idea of making a performance about the Armenian genocide? How was *Armine, Sister* conceived?

We make performances that are deeply rooted in us, thus it is difficult to identify a single primal cause of them. History and culture of Armenians were present in our work since the very beginning. Armenia was the aim of my first trip I took with Kamila Klamut ten years ago, when the ZAR Theatre was established. By “biting” through music – sometimes reconstructed, echoing in people, in generations – we attempted to find the starting material, the inspiration for our first performance, *The Gospels of Childhood*. After all, Armenia was the first country which accepted Christianity. We went to the Republic of Armenia, a free state, just after gaining independence when the Soviet Union collapsed, and we found neither the dynamics we sought (eventually they were offered to us by music of Georgia, and later Sardinia and Corsica), nor we met the right people, so the material for our first performance did not come from there. What we encountered in Armenia – the great polyphony, Mass of Makar Egmalian, Mass of Komitas made in Echmiadzin, the capital of the Armenian Apostolic Church – was not compatible with the direction of our artistic work. Everything was beautiful, we were very impressed, but we could not recognize dramatic and theatrical potential in it. This does not mean, however, that all that did not deposit in us as a sort of foundation, subsoil, in which we were still submerged.

Anyway, I wanted to return to history of Armenians, and thus also to the genocide in Anatolia. And so I did. We have been accomplishing the Armenian project for three years, since the premiere of *Anhelli*. Of course, it culminates now in a form of the performance, in a form of a musical composition, yet it has been developing for a very, very long time. One of the songs used in it, *Havadamk* (“We believe”) – the creed of the monophysite Armenian Church, older even than the Nicene Creed – was with us since the very beginning. When we first heard it in Yerevan, performed at a concert in the Philharmonics, we did not even know what it was and why all the audience stood up. Later we found this piece and learned it. And – jumping to the time of our work on *Armine, Sister* – it was Aram Kerovpyan who taught us how to sing *Havadamk* in a modal manner.

Was your work on *Armine, Sister* associated with next expeditions? Did you visit Armenia, or did Armenian musicians visit you?

It turned out that we could not learn modal singing in Armenia. It does not function there. It is a result of history of this part of Armenia, but also a consequence of broadly understood cultural policy, not only the Soviet one. Now, I would call it “westernization”, i.e. fascination with harmony, polyphony (understood in the western way), the concept of a big choir and implementation of these elements in liturgy. Modal singing was typical to the western Armenia, namely Anatolia, or the Armenian Highlands. This area, today inhabited by many peoples, used to be a home of Armenians for thousands of years. But there is no such music there anymore, because there have been no Armenians there for almost one hundred years. Therefore, we went to Istanbul. There are still over thirty Armenian churches in the city. However only the encounter with Aram Kerovpyan gave us the pedagogical and human key which opened this tradition to us. Yet, we did not meet Aram in Istanbul, but in Paris, where he is a master-singer of the Armenian cathedral. Aram comes from Istanbul – he is an exceptional practitioner, but also an academic researcher: he does research and reconstructs

old music. He is an active singer, and the author of publications on this topic. He also knows absolutely everyone who can say something about modal music in the Armenian liturgy, or who can simply sing it – and this turned out to be very useful to us. It was him who opened several doors for us in Istanbul. At the same time he became our gate through which we entered the world of Armenian modal music. Since the beginning we assumed that the work process would take at least two years. Each process of imprinting a songs into a memory, and of embodying it, requires at least such period of time.

Yet in the performance we can hear several songs belonging to traditions which are alien – or even to some extent hostile – to the Armenian Church. Where did you get the idea to have singers from Iran and Kurdistan?

At some point, when we began to study Armenian liturgical music and realize its complexity, but also its extraordinary inner consistence, I understood that I won't be able to construct a musical drama based on this one tradition. A palette of Armenian modal scales, extremely deep in their tone, prevented me from sketching everything I wanted. Then I thought: why not present these Armenian monodies in the context of strong and recognizable musical traditions, such as Kurdish and Persian? When we compare them, it turns out that one of the scales is actually identical. Unfortunately, only one. This allows the joint singing, though it is very difficult. So I assumed that in the production we will construct entire heterophonic fragments, with vocal lines based on completely different principles and different scales. This will enable the collision – we can call it “confrontation”, or even “conflict” – which is necessary to create a musical drama. But in fact, when we create a field of heterophony, geographically we remain on the same patch of land. Dengbej Kazo, who sings in the performance, comes from Van, which is the city with architecture shaped by Armenians. Today they are only remnants, traces, with the famous church on Aghtamar island in Lake Van.

While being taught modal singing by Aram Kerovpyan, in the beginning we decomposed and recomposed the material intended for us. Thus it was literally a matter of choice: what we are able and what we are not able to do. But later we realized that Aram could take part in the production and sing with us. It was the turning point of our work. That is how the concept of the choir was conceived: the choir surrounding the entire space, all actions integrated in it, in general, everything that happens on stage. We decided that this concept would be dramatically widened, that we would simply invite singers from Kurdistan, Persia, and even a few Armenians (hence the presence of Vahan Kerovpyan and Murat İçlinalç, a young singer, but already a master, who leads chants in one of the churches in the Asian side of Istanbul). Their presence fundamentally changed the course of our work. We led it to make it possible to construct a musical drama, as I still call it. Then we had to make this drama legible. First – audible, then – legible. When we sing all the material separately – it's like a rehearsed reading, or rather rehearsed singing – the clarity of the message contained therein is complete.

I would like to stay for a while in the sphere of musical dramaturgy, yet already entering a slightly different field, the field of meanings. Kurdish-Armenian relations were not so simple at the time of the extermination of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Kurds were executioners of Armenians. I wonder whether you thought about collision of music of both nations also in this context?

I did, absolutely. I decided that Kurdish voice would be extremely strong, unique, very expressive in our performance. It accompanies the turns of the action, moments when the pillars are moved, when the temple is demolished, finally, when the pillars burst. This

expresses great turns of history including little stories of individuals – perhaps, a fate of one woman, or maybe of four women (because we can see four actresses). Since the beginning I knew that the voice of Armenian songs could not express and fill those scenes, when our architectural stage machinery is subject to irreversible changes, telling about consistent destruction of the presence of Armenians, or even the traces of their presence. Such destruction has no end, even destruction of their traces has no end. I think this is the most horrific aspect of every genocide: physical extermination, death of thousands and hundreds of thousands of people – without trial, without due process – is followed by the sentence of sinking into oblivion and by consistent preparation of the scheme to implement this sentence. The image of genocide will be complete if we understand that thousands of people died by the hands of thousands of other people, who were given the power over life, history, and annihilation of memory. And in this sense, it is an ongoing process. It still functions, in dispersion, among millions of today's descendants of participants of those events.

In your performance the actors do not speak. Yet their operations are surrounded by music coming from the outside. Songs of the choir and soloists do speak, because they contain lyrics. But these words, except for a few sentences from the Armenian liturgy, were completely incomprehensible to me. Therefore, this layer of the performance is, paradoxically, beyond understanding of Polish viewers. You do not provide them with translation of the songs in the program. What is the dramatic meaning of the songs' lyrics to you, as a director? Do they contain any “plot” of this stage story?

The songs, which have become the building blocks of the composition – or at least their meanings, as well as the function they play in the liturgy – were taken into detailed consideration in the production. The performance opens with a fragment of the Gospel of St. John, chanted by Alessandra Curti accompanied by Aram and Murat. This fragment and its message, as well as the formula of voices coming towards each other from the opposite sides, establish the axis of the performance. This is a pericope of the resurrection of Lazarus. In addition, this is exactly the same piece that was cut short in *The Gospels of Childhood*. The reading by Martha and Mary was interrupted when Jesus came to Bethany, but waited on the border of the village. Marta comes to him and says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And these words, returning after two thousand years, make the sisters unable to read further – this concept we included in *The Gospels of Childhood*. In *Armine, Sister* we take the incantation at this very moment. This recitation was sung by the Murat's teacher, Nishan – a master of singing from Istanbul – and it leads us to the moment when Jesus wept. The Polish translation says “wept”, but the proper word should be rather “howled.” One can detect in this text some traces of exorcism, which Jesus performed on Lazarus. Resurrection of Lazarus was described only in the Gospel of St. John, but this passage appears in various versions in many non-canonical texts. In the so-called Arabic Gospel of John this passage is extended. This Gospel has its copies in Amharic language and I could read its fragments translated by Professor Witold Witkowski from Uppsala. The text includes a dialogue between Satan and his disciples. Satan is terrified of the power that can stop death with voice. For me, as a director, there is no stronger metaphor, no stronger sign than the idea of stopping death with voice. We can not defy death, we can only resist dying. Or rather, we can only describe it – our dying – with our voice. While working on *Armine*, tracing voices of those who had gone nearly a hundred years ago, I realized that dying of the dead never ends. A man who is alive dies once, but a dead man dies endlessly, dies forever. Those who were exiled, killed, deprived of dignity are in this endless “state of departing.” *Armine, Sister* is a kind of séance in which a voice is to describe – not to stop, just to describe

– this departing, this fading away, this staying silent. I would like this passage of the Gospel to lead the audience to read the meaning of the performance in this way.

In the same way I treat all the songs. All of them establish or indicate meaning, although there is no one who would understand all these languages. Another example: *Surp, Surp* – “Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts . . .” In our performance, this *Sanctus* by Komitas is sung in canon. But only the first part of it. There are no words of *Benedictus*, meaning “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” It is just a cry. Just a cry. The first part of the performance is built on continuous musical attempts to establish a theme, which could be carried through the entire drama, but they fail – consecutive songs and themes “fall down”, breaking a musical structure. Only *Credo – Havadamk* – is sung from the beginning to the end. This is a bit like a *zar* sung in *The Gospels of Childhood* – the central point of the performance – here forming a figure of the Three Youths in the fiery furnace. As we know, they were rescued by their singing – the flame did not burn them, although even those who cast them into the burning furnace perished in fire. They were calling the Name of the Lord, and nothing happened to them, because they were protected by the angel who was over them – that is, by their own breath, united with the eternal breath. That is what the deuterocanonical Book of Daniel says. And again, that voice frame appears that saves, not only through content it brings, but through the sound, through the vibration. As long as it lasts, there is life in it. So ends the first part of drama.

The performance is a tripartite composition. It consists of eleven stage images, showing the turn of history. There is a question hidden in them: how long can we recognize identity of the place in which we are (and therefore also identity of the time in which we live). When the viewers leave the hall after the performance, the only question I could ask them, would be: if the place they leave is still an image of a temple for them. In the beginning of the performance it is clear to us that we are in a church – such associations are provided by temple-like architecture, and by the presence of the Gospel. Yet is it still a temple by the end of the performance, when, literally, there is no grain of sand left upon another? And that is how Armenian churches in Anatolia look today – if I can refer to our travel experience. However, in the desert, which we can see in the final scene of the performance, there are not only remains of the church, human debris, fragments of life, which once blossomed here. There are also ordinary prints of soldiers’ boots. This is not an ideal – or idealized – image, but an attempt to capture the moment when the image speaks to us most strongly. I call the final scenes of the performance “a liturgy of dust.” This liturgy is “celebrated” there every day – that is to say that a wind celebrates it over debris. So, is it still a temple?

For me, this landscape of the passing time was obvious. This observation even dictated me the way of perceiving the performance. But I guess I was not a typical spectator. A few years ago I traveled to Anatolia and near Lake Van I was looking for Narek. Thus, I saw this real landscape. I did not find Narek, but I saw ruins of dozens of churches – many of them fall apart, some served as crofts for cows. Sometimes only foundations remained, overgrown, or covered with sand. They cave in, change into heaps of stones, and turn into sand. This landscape, even its color, I noticed in your performance. In Anatolia only silence and sand really speaks about the genocide. Only after I returned to Poland I learned that Narek today is called Yemisilk. The church of Gregory of Narek used to stand where a mosque stands today (it was built in 1960s), and the only trace of Armenians is a broken fragment of a khachkar. Why am I telling this? You said that you wanted to ask the audience the question whether they can see the traces of the old temple when they leave the hall after your performance. My answer would be “Yes, I

can.” Sand buries everything, but temples cannot be “torn down” as long as you remember. They exist even as sand. And you also gave the audience a lot of clear signals, small artifacts peeping out from under the sand. Church fans . . .

. . . they are, actually, musical instruments, called *kushotz* . . .

. . . **images** . . .

. . . indeed, you can find their traces: a dried up piece of bread, a thurible . . .

. . . and, most of all, sand, which the temple has turned into. Sand, in which lies the dead body of a beautiful girl. Still dying – as you previously said. Representing the genocide by destruction of a temple is, in my opinion, an extremely accurate procedure. Beside radical literalism of acting, there is also a very strong metaphor in it.

Religious music – or, more precisely, liturgical music – has been particularly important to us since the very beginning of the ZAR Theatre. We try to transfer it and use it in contemporary theatre, to draw it into the domain of stage. We are convinced that stage can be a “place of human experience,” and this conviction gives us courage. And in this sense, there is no difference between a theatre stage and a church – between boards of a stage and a floor of a church – because they are equally close to human feet.

The concept of a church, which is systematically destroyed and – as if that was not enough – its elements are used as tools to further destruction, has been present since the very beginning of the work on this production. Gallows are made of the pillars, tombstones are made of the pillars, then railroad ties are made of tombstones, and then finally everything turns into sand. This idea was the most frightening to me and I wanted to include it in *Armine*. First we began to write this story with improvisations – this little story made of tens, hundreds, thousands of reports and memories of a time of extermination. The authors of such memories of the death marches [in 1915 about half a million of Armenians were expelled from Anatolia to the Syrian Desert, where many of them died of exhaustion and lack of water – T.K.] were usually women, children, and elders. Men were usually killed immediately, hanged, or used to hard labor, during which they died of exhaustion.

The stories of women recorded in these memoirs are horrifying. Yet there is only one “story that exists,” all the others are constructions. A story is a sequence of life, a sequence of events recorded in the heart and body of every human being and in this way transmitted, transferred. We wanted to evoke this story. When we were reading it – or, rather writing it by improvisations – referring to those memories, images passed by the women, I realized that in our performance the temple, and then the debris of the temple – the field of khachkars, the cemetery field, and even the railroad ties – that all these elements are located only in the “room of memories.” A bit like in Tadeusz Kantor’s productions . . .

I rather associated *Armine* with *Akropolis* by The Laboratorium Theatre . . .

Indeed, both *Akropolis* [by Grotowski’s Laboratorium] and *Wielopole, Wielopole* [by Kantor’s Cricot 2] were the most important theatre references for me. I tried to intertwine these two directions of thinking about theatre into one, and it was possible thanks to reading the discipline of musical composition which reconciles these two works. Certainly, we included in *Armine, Sister* the original idea of counterpoint (not only musical, but also

dramatic one), which is exclusively ours – it is contemporary. However, without these two masterpieces we would absolutely not have courage to do in theatre something that has got such a radical form – and probably we would not even understand that one can do something like that. It is not a matter of specific references, or reenactments, yet I am absolutely permeated with both *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* and *Akropolis*. There is an assumption in *Armine*, that all of these happens in a room of memories, that the bed still has not left this room, that the door falling out of its frames, hit by a rifle's butt, or a soldier's boot – I do not know – are still falling in the infinity of time, out of time; that this is only a confession of a girl who was raped, and who is “offered” to have the fetus aborted, which means tearing of her body – and of her memory – an image which penetrated her body and which will stay with her for her entire life – and grow up from her – unless she cut it. For this little, intimate story is also an image belonging to the genocide, becoming equivalent to the destruction of the temple. Someone who destroys a human being, in a certain sense destroys a temple.

You have already began speaking a bit about acting. . . . Women perform the most poignant roles in your production. Men appear as aggressive, destructive element, or as an after-image of, perhaps, the biblical young martyrs in the fiery furnace.

Division between men and women is a fundamental dramaturgical device, which is supported by the interpretation of history. Here men embody force of destruction and self-destruction, as in the scene when *Credo* is sung. However, in our performance there are also another, very painful memories involving men: images that may be held in secret by women, and that, paradoxically, keep them alive. In one scene, a woman leaps on a body of a martyred man, left hanging on a pole from God knows how many days. So she leaps, covering his face with her own body, as if she wanted to tear off this image. The man sends her back gently, catching her body, but he also shields himself – he does not want to be evoked, he does not want to be remembered in such a way. He sends her back repeatedly, until she finally tears him off with a great effort – just like she tore him off an execution pole in her memory, for this was the only thing she could do.

Is this image – and other images in the performance – conceived in your imagination, or do they refer to particular photographs and documents of that era?

Both. Of course, these images owe their energy and their radicalism to our exposition to such photographs – for example, photographs by Armin Wegner – or other documents of the genocide, however they are not quotations from these photographs, for many reasons. Firstly, I would not dare doing this. I see no deep reason to evoke people from the past in such a way. We can evoke them – call them – with our voice, but we can do it with images, too. While I believe that with my voice I can get closer to what was – potentially – sung in churches in Anatolia, yet I am much more cautious as far as the visual aspects are concerned. This does not mean that I renounce it completely. Everything in the production has been very clearly inspired by these images of the genocide, yet it has been heavily processed.

This also refers to the question of the church. We have sixteen pillars – this is a principle of construction of every Armenian temple. This arrangement is the only certain archetype. Even if – thanks to precise proportions – we have an impression that we really are in the temple, this is only an invoked image. Thus we must remember that “we are in the image;” that our bodies are not those tormented bodies; that we are Europeans living in the twenty-first century (we, the actors, and we the spectators – all of us in one image). In the ZAR Theatre we do not use the category of a character as a dramatic principle, without which one cannot construct a

drama or complete a production. In our performances a character may only briefly manifest itself – mainly through a voice.

You used the term “radicalism of images.” I would add “radicalism of acting.” You used very strong signs: a naked body, a body subjected to violence. Sometimes I had the impression that such acting is associated with physical pain, that not only the characters but also the actors suffer for real. The actors’ breath does not lie.

I guess you are referring to the scene where one of the actresses “becomes a pillar,” she takes the place of a pillar. . . . This is not just an aesthetic radicalism. One of fundamental questions that accompanied me in my work is the following: if it really happens that I evoke someone’s voice (and by singing songs of Anatolian Armenians, I do evoke their voices with my voice), that I evoke an image with a shape of my body, and at the same time I know that this particular gesture represents a cry of real lives: the people who lived a hundred years ago (because precisely one hundred years ago they were still alive) – so in what shape does the soul of the tormented come? When I call their spiritual, eternal part – I am deeply convinced of its existence – in what shape does the soul of the tormented come? Does it come in the body that remembers its last shape – in the body which is bond, tortured, devastated? These are the images from which we know Armenians of the early twentieth century. To be precise – on the photographs from the early twentieth century, the epoch when photography was becoming more and more popular, Armenians are portrayed primarily as dead. Their bodies are naked, battered. I am horrified by the idea that evoked beings of particular persons would enter in such image, the only image of them that remained. With the voice we give them not only a form, but also a new life. the breath is needed as a vehicle. The breath is needed as a form.

Besides the actors’ bodies, I wanted several elements to be used in the performance. They include substances that have been always present in the productions of The ZAR Theatre and show the passage of time or, perhaps above all, the irreversibility of the process of passing. In *Armine* these substances are: sand, pomegranate, flatbread called *lavash*, linen, and . . . actors’ skin. These substances are subject to continuous metamorphoses. And at the end of this process there is a human body as an icon. It was obvious to us that nudity cannot be the border beyond which we could not reach. This may be very explicitly expressed in confrontation with sand, bread, fruits of pomegranate. But this is not literal. When we encounter Christian icons showing purgatory or hell – we can find them in many temples – we see only naked bodies, burned in the fire. Clothes, everything they covered them – as a sign of shame, or innocence, or sin (it doesn’t matter) – no longer exist. And yet in a performance we speak about a real purgatory – “real” in a sense that it definitely happened here on earth. While working on the show I realized that, if existence of heaven cannot be ruled out, therefore also existence of hell cannot be negated. This idea was conceived in us during the work on *Armine*. The quintessence of what I am saying now is the scene in which a half-naked woman stands by the site of a temple pillar. She takes a pose in which perhaps she was executed, or murdered, and so she stays there. She finds her place and becomes a pillar. Forever.