

1.

How to show disintegration of the world in theatre? How to show genocide? How to present landscape of oblivion? Is it even possible?

When viewers enter the semi-dark hall of the Studio na Grobli, they are welcomed with a passage from the Gospel sung in Armenian. The sets consists of huge pillars, a typical element of numerous Armenian churches. Before the spectators take their seats, they pass through this forest of pillars – as if they were in a temple. A silhouette of the cantor, standing at the end of the hall is barely visible in the dim light. He raises his arms in a prayerful gesture and prostrates with humility. We can hear a pericope on the resurrection of Lazarus. . . .

2.

Greater Armenia covered a huge area. It was the first country in the world that embraced Christianity as a state religion (in AD 301). The Armenian Apostolic Church is neither Roman Catholic nor Orthodox. There are doctrinal differences between both of them and the Armenian Church, because it rejected the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. The Church teachings include Monophysite elements, and it has got its own liturgy as well as liturgical language. For these reasons, the Church is a clear sign of Armenians' distinction.

History of Armenians, as many nations of Asia Minor, is extremely tangled. Once Greater Armenia stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Anatolia was the homeland of Armenians for centuries. Even in the early twentieth century, many of them lived next to the Turks, Kurds and other national groups. However, the policy of Young Turks more and more marginalized Christians, particularly Armenians. Already in the late nineteenth century there were pogroms and killings. In 1915, the tragedy took place – the Armenian Massacre – the first genocide organized by the state apparatus on such a large scale. According to various estimates, one or even two million Armenians were killed on the territory of present-day Turkey between 1915 and 1920. Mass executions, heinous crimes, deportation of thousands of people to the Syrian desert, where they died of hunger and exhaustion – that was the picture of those years. The picture now slowly forgotten, repressed, and erased from the memory of Europe.

Today, driving through central and eastern Turkey, we encounter hundreds of Armenian churches, sometimes converted into mosques, but often going to rack and ruin, turned into stables, destroyed by people in need of construction materials, sometimes fading in the sand landscape. Ani, the former capital of Armenians, named “the city of a thousand and one churches” is situated within the borders of Turkey. Nowadays it makes a ghostly impression: an empty, desolate place with ruins of temples and other buildings destroyed by time. Also Mount Ararat – a holy mount for Armenians, and the symbol of their national identity – is in Turkey now. Today Turkey and Armenia do not keep mutual diplomatic relations, and there are no official passes through the border between the two countries. Armenians can only watch Ani from the other side of the border river. Also the slopes of Ararat are unavailable for them, although the mount towers over Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Those symbols are at least within the sight view of Armenians. The vast majority of the ruins proving the presence

of Armenians in Anatolia are situated hundreds of kilometers from the borders of today's Armenia.

Armenian churches were often erected on borders of villages, and even more often in areas far from the cities, due to strong monastic tradition. Today in Anatolia only their remnants in the wilderness prove that once they used to be inhabited. They are also the marks of the Armenian Holocaust. Wind and sand destroy them slowly. But even these destroyed temples look beautiful: they are like tombs. More than one million of victims who died there do not have their own graves.

Therefore, the choice of a church as a sign of extermination in the performance by the Zar Theatre was very accurate, even obvious. But how to use such space in theatre?

3.

The spectators sit on the benches on opposite sides of the hall. The performance space is filled densely with the already mentioned forest of sixteen thick pillars, arranged regularly, four in each of four rows. None of the audience has a chance to see everything that is going on in the performance space: the view is blocked by the thick pillars. . . .

Indeed, the space resembles an Armenian church, it is just a resemblance; in no real temple pillars were erected so densely. However, twilight, sifting warm light, and the Gospel pericope sang leave no doubt: a reference to a temple's interior is obvious. During the performance, this space will undergo far-reaching metamorphosis. When a wave of violence breaks out, huge and heavy pillars will be moved by men in military boots. They will be toppled and their binding metal hoops will fall from a high, producing a sharp sound, contributing to establishment of terrifying landscape of destruction. Toppling the pillars and erecting the new ones change the proportions of the interior; we have an impression as if the church has come to life and turned on its axis. Physical violence, present in the music and operations of the actors add to the landscape of destruction. At some point sand begins to leak from the fractured pillars. The interior of the temple becomes a place of torment, violence, and torture. But also the temple itself is subjected to them. Is this brutally demolished interior still a church?

About halfway of the performance, for a moment we return to the liturgy: again in the twilight, three men come to the middle of the space, as if they were ghosts. They leave hammers, stand in a circle, and sing *Havadamk*, a confession of faith in God. Are they the living people, or just shadows of those who have already been murdered here? Three motionless silhouettes sing passionately, raising their arms in supplications. This church – though some pillars disappeared, though it is ruined, though it was a stage of atrocities – becomes a house of prayer for a while. Yet who is praying: alive, or the dead?

Disintegration of the space continues – huge pillars still break, sand still leaks out of them, but now some of them are arranged in tripods, making a distinctive conical shapes. Anyone who has seen pictures of the extermination of Armenians, will recognize this shape. Executioners hanged their victims on such gallows.

The space keeps deteriorating. Only a few pillars remained in the sandy landscape; the others form a cemetery. Khachkars – uniquely distinctive Armenian tombstones – fill a large part of the hall. But this is not the end. . . . Khachkars can be used as railroad ties. In the corner of the

hall, the cemetery is turned into railroad track. Another unusual scene: actors lie down next to arranged railroad ties. The dead, commemorated by khachkars, now talk like shadows, and again lie next to each other. The scene is outlined without any literality, in a very gentle, poetic manner – and perhaps this is why it is so explicit. The destroyed pillars, sand hills – this is a landscape of the final part of the performance. Somewhere in a pile of sand one can notice tarnished liturgical fans, dried flatbread called *lavash*, a thurible, trampled pomegranates, a woman's body. This is all that has remained of the temple, of the cemetery, of the nation that used to live here. There is even no one to pray over the woman buried in the sand. The woman and the temple disintegrate now with the passage of time. They will remain here until the memory of them remains. Then there will be only a desert; souls and prayers will dissolve in a breath of a wind.

4.

Space of the performance is filled with almost continual singing. The Zar Theatre, while working on *Armine, Sister*, invited to collaboration singers from Armenia, Iran and Kurdistan. They come from the two opposite ends of the hall, surrounding the field of actions. They form two half-choirs spinning a musical tale, covering the entire story within. The music, sung live, is not just a background. It often enters the space of the performance, and many musical themes entwine with particular operations of actors. The previous productions of the Zar Theatre – *Gospels of Childhood*, *Caesarean Section*, and *Anhelli* – were also based on music. It resonated continuously. This time, however – for the first time – there are not only the group members who sing. There are other singers too, and not ordinary ones. Aram Kerovpyan – a cantor in the Armenian cathedral in Paris, who holds the Ph.D. title in musicology, a singer in a great Ensemble de Musique Armenienne – was a teacher of the Zar Theatre in the field of modal singing. During the performance he is responsible for singing Armenian liturgical music. Beside him, there are also other Armenians: Vahan Keprovpyan (from Paris), and Murat İçlinalça (a master of singing from Istanbul). We can hear not only the Armenian song. Kurdish music is quite different. Dengbej Kazo is a representative of the dying tradition of singers-storytellers of epic poems, legendary tales of warriors. In 1960 the Turkish government officially banned the dengbej practice. However, they kept singing their national epic tales, and in 2003 they succeeded to build a meeting house in Diyarbakir and officially restore the tradition of Kurdish vocal tales. There are also two Iranian women singing in the performance: sisters Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat, founders of the Vahdat Ensemble. The repertoire of the group consists of traditional Iranian music – especially Persian poetry of Rumi, Hafez, Saadi. It is worth noting that in Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979, women have not been allowed to sing solo publicly. In the Zar Theatre they can ignore this prohibition.

Music is the core of the performance. If you close your eyes, you can even treat this as a great concert. Considering a term to describe the genre of the performance, I would not hesitate calling it “musical drama.” It is extremely versatile, with climaxes, and its own musical dynamics. Yet its “plot” is very difficult to tell correctly. The “content” consists of songs sung in at least three different languages. This time, unlike in their previous productions, the Zar Theatre Zar did not include synopsis in the program. Therefore, for most of the viewers the words are devoid of meaning. What affects the audience instead of words is the very sound, its intensity and dramaturgy.

As I already wrote, the performance begins with singing a Gospel pericope about the resurrection of Lazarus. As the pillars were the set frame of *Armine, Sister*, the Armenian

liturgical singing was its musical frame. Obviously, the director does not recreate the full order of the holy service, but the central points of the performance are marked with modal singing from Armenian liturgy. In the beginning it is the Gospel pericope, then *Sanctus* (*Surp*, *Surp* means “Holy, Holy”), then, in the central moment of the performance, *Credo* (*Havadamk*), and, at the end, a hymn about the resurrection of Christ, composed by Saint Nerses, and sung very dynamically. The axis of Armenian spirituality is clearly outlined, while the drama of the nation is also convincingly presented. In the beginning we are in the temple; after the destruction, *Havadamk* is sang only by shadows; the liturgy ends with a chant of resurrection, sang with poignant tension. Then there is only silence.

There is also another order in the musical drama. Singing of Dengbej Kazo foreshadows violence and destruction. His songs are completed by cries of men dismantling the temple and sounds of falling metal hoops. In the most dramatic moment, the singer abandons words; he builds a space of horror with a modulated wordless vocalise. His fantastic, beautiful voice tells about violence, rape, and destruction. Perhaps – I do not know that – he sings some old Kurdish epic, yet the dramatic line of the performance gives his song an obvious function: it is an assailant against gentle liturgical chants.

Finally, a few words about the poignant songs of the Vahdat sisters. In this case, there are no simple patterns of interpretation we can apply. Their singing refers to another order, beyond the context of the Armenian genocide. The protagonists of the performance are women – abused, tormented, and tortured. The Vahdat sisters by their singing emphasize this aspect of the tale and enter into dialogue with the operations of actresses. The songs tell something that perhaps cannot be expressed by the actions alone; they make us aware of the inner world of humiliated women.

The above description is merely an outline of a large and complex structure. It has been written from the point of view of a viewer who is familiar neither with Persian nor Kurdish languages, and who understands only a few words of the Armenian liturgy. Such a viewer is dependent solely on his guessing and emotional sensitivity.

In the last scenes of the performance the music stops, and the singers leave the hall one by one. There is a frightening silence, in which the actress repeat the ritual of dying again and again. One can only hear clatter and hum of sand – the sound of time, passing inevitably. The sound of forgetting. At the end, all motions come to a standstill, and even the shadows of tortured women melt away in the wind. There is only one body left, half-buried in sand. Motionless. The silence continues and embraces the spectators, stuck in it.

5.

In this production, the fate of an Armenian temple became synonymous with the fate of the entire nation. Variations on this space reached many levels. The church also transformed into a typical Armenian house. An oil lamp from the church, taken by an actress, became a household light, illuminating a bed, a door, a table, a chair, hidden in darkness. Later, the house turns into a torture chamber, a prison. A girl falls down on the door, torn from its hinges, collapsing with a bang. Peace of the house is brutally profaned. The bed turns from place of a rest into a field of rape and violence.

The actors do not speak. Surrounded by songs, they perform extremely expressive scenes in front of us. Besides a few moments, women exist separately, they do not enter into relations

with one another. Each of them establishes a strong personality, yet their stories are sketched subtly and ambiguously, although they are always marked by violence.

On the other hand, men cooperate with each other all the time in an act of destroying the world. Ruining the church, carrying and breaking the pillars requires synchronized collaboration. Commands are shouted, amplified with a clang of metal and chains. Their physical effort is real. Dressed in heavy boots, equipped with hammers and ropes, half-naked, sweating in the real toil, they act like a single yet multi-element machine of destruction.

Around the time of the premiere, the Zar Theatre organized two exhibitions. The exhibition *Być świadkiem świadków* [To be a witness of witnesses] was set on the streets of Wrocław, while the exhibition *Obrazy z Anatolii* [Images of Anatolia], presenting photographs by Magdalena Mądra was set in the hall of the theatre. Images by Magdalena Mądra show Armenian temples in eastern Turkey in their today's state – ruined, yet still beautiful and noble. On the other hand, the exhibition on Świdnicka street shows photographs taken in the times of extermination. Photographs by Magdalena Mądra contrast sharply with photographs by Armin Theophil Wegner, who photographed the Armenian genocide. Both exhibitions complement each other. Wegner – a German officer serving in the Ottoman army – documented the tragedy. He was one of few people who made pictures at that time. Piles of corpses, human despair, bodies hanging on the tripod gallows, despair of a mother over her child's corpse, famine. . . . A camera is ruthless and dispassionate. Yet one cannot look indifferently at these images. It is impossible not to think about the one who took them. What did he feel? What did he think? These inquiries are followed by even more shocking question: how was it possible to murder unarmed and defenseless people so methodically, so ruthlessly?

Images referring to the photographic documentation of extermination can be traced in the performance. At some point, a man with a tripod resembling a camera stand, enters the stage. He stays just for a moment – not all spectators can even notice and remember him. Yet this is an important signal, for a lot of images in the performance of the Zar Theatre reminds photographs from the street exhibition. I would like to emphasize: they resemble them, yet do not imitate. Anyway, the afterimages of corpses hanging on gallows or bodies buried in sand cannot be easily escaped.

Besides one scene of interrogation, all the images in this dream-like performance are ambiguous and open to interpretation. We, the viewers, can sense rather than understand what is happening: rapes, hanging victims heads down, madness, pain and despair . . . the bed – a site of rape and violence – to which a woman is bound . . . pregnancy. . . . The bed wanders across the entire hall, and at some point it is even pulled to the top of high pillar and it hangs on chains. This is the world without borders and directions.

Men form a kind of a corporate body, committing acts of violence. However, there are scenes which break this pattern – when they take roles of afterimages of the victims. They gather in the middle of the stage, like ghosts, to sing one more *Havadamk* for those who died. Women, performed by Ditte Berkeley, Kamila Klamut, Aleksandra Kotecka and Simona Sala do not join them. In fact, we observe the extermination from their perspective; we witness their ordeal, their humiliation, their death.

The final scenes of the performance remain in memory for a long time. The church has turned into a ruin, the music has stopped, only the actresses remained on the stage. One of them (Ditte Berkeley) finds a golden thurible somewhere in the sand. She picks it up. We look at a woman mad from despair who incenses the sand – the grave of so many lives – with gentle movements. The thurible is empty, but this is the only way to bid farewell to her dead ones and to sanctify their memory. It is hard to describe this scene, yet its power is shocking. Another woman (Aleksandra Kotecka) repeats her dying, time and time again, in the silence of the shattered world. She stands where the pillar used to stand. She suspends in an unnatural position, as a body tied to a pole, half naked, and stands still. She lifts up to die again, and again. . . . She becomes a pillar of the church now. All this happens in a terrifying silence. The last woman (Simona Sala) makes a few predatory, dramatic gestures, then freezes, becoming an element of the dead landscape, a decaying body subjected to a process of forgetting, over which there is no longer any prayer.

The ZAR Theatre

Armine, Sister

Musical dramaturgy, installation, direction: Jarosław Fret

Modal song studio led by: Aram Kerovpyan

Premiere: November 28th, 2013 in The Studio na Grobli of the Jerzy Grotowski Institute in Wrocław