

A river of glass runs through gut-wrenching 'Caesarean Section'



THEATER REVIEW: "Caesarean Section"

Friday and Saturday at Jay

Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park; Tickets: \$33 at 312-742-8497 or

www.millenniumpark.org

"Caesarean Section," the stunning hour-long work from Poland's Teatr Zar playing in Chicago just this weekend, is a mediation on suicide. More specifically, it's about the impulses that push us toward despair and the compensations that pull us back from capitulation. If you think about Samuel Beckett's famous phrase, "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on," you'll have a pretty clear idea of the point of this aptly titled, edge-of-the-precipice show, performed (indoors) in Millennium Park on the stage of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion.

I'll stipulate right now that "Caesarean Section," part of a theatrical triptych acclaimed in London and soon to be seen in Los Angeles, is by no means everyone's idea of weekend fun. It is a gut-wrenching, primal, non-literal piece with a capacity to disturb that seems to seep right into your bones. This was a show years in the making, and to say that these intensely focused performers evoke a high-stakes theatrical landscape does not even begin to describe the existential horrors they go through on your behalf.

Their playing scape is dissected by a river of broken glass, and these destructive shards threaten to bloody all their movements at any moment. These actors come with a level of physical preparation that is unfamiliar to Americans used to watching shows that rehearse for less than a month. And this command of their physical instrument means that actors seem to

have possessed bodies that they can hurtle toward the floor, slamming themselves into a wooden platform as sensual movements morph into psychological demons.

Led by Jaroslaw Fret, Teatr Zar are close young disciples of the late, great Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish teacher and director who viewed theater as a ritualistic, communal and minimalist experience, an essential secular rite. I've seen plenty of Grotowski-influenced work in my time, but I would say there are three things that set this show apart.

First and foremost, this is not just a movement-driven exploration of one's inner demons. The piece is suffused — and I don't use that term lightly — with harmonic, polyphonic music. The show was developed during several years of work in Georgia about the turn of the millennium, and it incorporates traditional Corsican songs, along with Bulgarian, Romanian, Icelandic and Chechen influences. So as they fling their bodies around, this astonishing cast are also playing several instruments and singing beautifully. You could close your eyes and have a perfectly rewarding evening, especially if you are interested in musical chants and global sound. I have never Grotowski seen work combined with music in such an all-embracing fashion.

Second, although this piece comes with no dialogue and delves to the deepest human places, it has none of the morose pretentiousness you find with lesser practitioners of this art. This is sexually charged performance that makes this realm feel fresh and vital.

The last reason has nothing directly to do with Teatr Zar, whom I hope will return here soon with the rest of their triptych. It is a function of the location. When one seeks out Grotowski-like experimentation, one generally has to ascend to a raw loft or descended to a cramped basement. Here, you sit in a beautiful space, staring out at Millennium Park and the city of Chicago. It is both a gorgeous view and, since it includes looking at a forest of empty seats, a vista of urban loneliness that only intensifies the drama.

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