

Everything about this performance felt right

Chronicles—a lamentation by the Teatre Piesn Kizla

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The Polish theatre company *Teatr Piesn Kozla*, (translated as The Song of the Goat Theatre Company) recently performed its award winning production of *Chronicles—a lamentation*, as part of the international presentations of this year's Sydney festival.

The outcome of two years of research, *Chronicles* is breathtaking in its use of “lamentation”, to portray part of the ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh the King, part-man, part-god, and his search for immortality.

The tradition of lamentation, the expression of sorrow at a funeral through mourning and wailing, dates back to ancient times, both in Europe and the Middle East. In some cases, the lamentations followed a set musical structure. In general, its role was to retell the life of the person who had died. But through research, the company found in northern Epiros (the region straddling Greece and Albania and once the cradle of Ancient Greek drama) a place where families requested that the wailers embroider the life of their loved one with semi-mythical events, almost as a type of theatre.

They also found that the traditional songs in this area were polyphonic lamentations (individual melodies harmonising together) and contained a division of voices—the voice that weaves or perches, the voice that cuts, the voice that takes or gives and the drone.

Chronicles—a lamentation is built around this division, both in its vocal form and its dramatic structure. The protagonist in each episode “acts out” the poetry, weaving it from the singing and music. The divisions of the voices can be seen to correspond to the dramatic function of each actor-singer. For example, the “weaver” and “taker” can correspond to the protagonist and antagonist. As production notes explain: “These songs are like the warp on a loom, on which the narration and ‘pattern’ of the story emerges” (see *Teatr Piesn Kozla* <http://www.piesnkozla.pl>).

The performance began with the actors singing beautiful Albanian songs while sitting on thrones set in a semi-circle and thus creating the atmosphere of a sacred gathering. Three women, supported by the male choir, began a haunting chant in Polish about the deeds of Gilgamesh, swaying backward and forward and swinging bells on long strings. The raw, strangely evocative and intensely emotional performance transports audiences back to ancient times and the emotional journey of Gilgamesh, his tragic loss of a friend, his search for an immortal life and his ultimate acceptance of the finite nature of his life.

The fluidity of the performance was mesmerising. Clearly influenced by the great Polish avant-garde director Jerzy Grotowski (1933-99), this was theatre stripped of all the unessentials.

A dimly lit bare stage onto which the actors brought all they needed for the performance. Minimal light effects, deliberate use of shadow contrasted with the bright light of an open flame. Simple furniture carefully arranged and moved about as part of the piece.

From one scene to another, the actors moved gracefully, singing, chanting, and moving with incredible agility and precision. They would transform from type to type, character to character, using only their body and craft. The actors showed a stunning display of control and beauty and their precision in movement and song was superb. Everything in this performance felt right.

But *Chronicles* was not just about performance; it is also about human suffering. In fact, the actors' warmth toward the audience and the laments, which in ancient times were seen to function as a means of coming to terms with death, even a cure for the grief and pain that accompanies loss, generated a strong sense of harmony.

Teatr Piesn Kozla, which was founded in 1997 by

Grzegorz Bral and Anna Zubrzycki, has been hailed by many as the most exciting and innovative of the new theatre movements in Poland. It continues the long tradition of Polish ensemble theatre work and, through its dedication to ongoing research in the actor's craft and its vocal and movement techniques has created a unique performance style.

The company spent its first four years in residence at the Jerzy Grotowski Centre for Theatre culture Research, in Wroclaw, Poland but since 2002 it has acquired its own studio space—the refectory of a fourteenth century monastery in the heart of Wroclaw.

Teatr Piesn Kozla is an international ensemble company with members from the UK, Sweden, Norway and France as well as Poland and draws young performers from all over the world to participate in its extensive artistic and pedagogical program. It organizes workshops regularly over the year, teaching its own unique approach to the actor's craft.

Chronicles—a lamentation, is an extraordinary work and a testament to the detailed research into theatrical forms and acting technique that underpins all this company's work.



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