

Excerpted from-

Was macht ein Ritual wahrhaftig?

16th – 26th January 2009

PhD Research Diary: Dzieci

By Jessica Bockler

Fools Mass

Upon arrival in the city on the 16th January, I met the ensemble and first witnessed its work at Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village. Dzieci were here to perform *Fools Mass*. I was intrigued, wondering what the performance of a mass in a church would, indeed could, entail.

On first sight, Middle Collegiate Church looked strangely out of place in the busy streets of downtown Manhattan. The kind of church one would expect to see at the heart of a European market town ... here squashed between two urban five-storey buildings on 2nd Avenue. Similarly, the interior of the church, lined with Tiffany windows and a large, shiny pipe organ, appeared to make a somewhat surreal attempt at reconciling traditional values with modern East Village flair – giving the sanctuary a timeless, yet artificial feel.



Later I read that Middle Church is one of four Collegiate Churches in New York City affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, whose fiercely progressive community celebrates their faith, drawing on diverse forms of creative expression: Middle Church boasts several choirs, a gallery, and even hosts a dance company. Dzieci did not seem out of place. I also found out that Dzieci's performance that evening was meant to be part of its year-long residency with New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the first Northern American teaching institution of the Reformed Church in America, preparing students for ministry. Dzieci had been appointed as Visiting Artist for the seminary in September 2008, with the aim to demonstrate the potential of theatre work in ministry practice, through workshops and events for students and faculty throughout the year.

It was the first time that I saw Dzieci in action. I was intrigued about *Fools Mass* which the company described as their signature piece. I had read little about it so far, I was keen to receive the piece viscerally before gaining an intellectual grasp. I knew that *Fools Mass* had arisen as a by-product of Dzieci's work on Aldous Huxley's historical treatise *The Devils of Loudoun*. I knew that the piece attempted to unite the world of theatre with the domain of religious ritual.

In *Fools Mass*, a group of medieval village peasants, handicapped castoffs of society, are by circumstance called to conduct a mass because their beloved priest has died from plague - and so the peasants must struggle through the service on their own. I had read in past audience feedback that *Fools Mass* juxtaposes mockery, sabotage and chaos ... with moments of sublime stillness and calm. I looked forward to seeing the wisdom of the fool in action.

I introduced myself to the company, shared a sentence or two about the purpose of my visit. I was warmly welcomed. Most of the members of the company had already changed into their medieval costumes and now congregated around the altar of the church. They stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, eyes closed in one moment, open in the next, making firm eye contact. As they began to sing I wished I had chosen to sit closer. Their voices, facing inward in the circle, seemed somewhat lost in the large space of the church. One of the ensemble repeatedly ventured away from the group to listen in from a distance - his feedback punctuated the songs: "Flat here." "Sopranos a bit louder." There was occasional laughter amidst the singing. I immediately noticed the difference between Dzieci's approach to working with songs - and that of the Workcenter in Pontedera. I wondered if Dzieci worked on 'sourcing' the songs in the body. I wasn't sure. Did they listen to the songs as they took flight in the space? Whilst harmonious and attentive, the performers' voices struck me as somewhat dis-embodied and not primarily relating to the space. I decided not to draw further comparisons, I knew that judgement would cloud my ability to perceive.

The ensemble moved seamlessly into character and continued setting up the space. There was much hustle and bustle amongst them, each fool appeared to have a specific role in the setup of the mass - yet no one looked quite like they knew what they are doing. None of the characters appeared stereotyped to me - and many fools radiated a surprising honesty, grounded in a disarming simplicity of physical repertoire. The

madness portrayed seemed to originate from the edges within, the struggles and wounds of each individual. How could I tell? Hard to say. Their madness felt authentic. Not a charade of insanity, but an unmasking of inner struggle, exposing a sincere vulnerability.

The audience began to arrive, were greeted and seated by the fools. Not many had turned out. I empathised with the ensemble - a large space without a substantial audience ... is difficult to fill.

The chaotic setup continued, much to the amusement of the few watching eyes. The fools awaited the arrival of the priest who was also their guardian. I understood only later that the name of the priest was Jerzy - in memory of Jerzy Grotowski, who Dzieci regard as the father of their theatrical lineage.

Then a shift. The fools suddenly realise that their beloved priest has died ... and that they are charged with conducting the mass - but none of them quite remembers how the service ought to be delivered. What follows is a Christian liturgy not like any I have ever experienced. As I watch the fools, in their disparate ways, cobble together the essential ingredients of the Christian mass - the reading of the scriptures, the sharing of the Gospel, the sermon, the liturgy of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion - I ponder what makes a ritual distinct from a theatrical presentation of such ritual. When is a ritual truly enacted and not merely presented? And how do I feel about a Christian mass enacted in such an unorthodox, such foolish way? Do the fools of Dzieci not make a mockery of a holy service? On the surface much of what I see feels ridiculous, the fools' mass leaves little space for solemnity. And yet everything changes when the fools sing. With every song, chaos and insanity give way to delightful stillness. And as the harmonies unfurl their wings and take flight, the church is bathed in moments of arresting unity, in which the fools' disarming sincerity shines so brightly that their insanity becomes invisible. Heart open, Jessica. Dzieci is a company of the heart.

Fools Mass is a paradox which leaves me intrigued and disturbed. Later, I ponder how the individual performers feel about Christianity. Are they practising Christians? And ... do they have to be? What does the enactment of a mass mean to them? And what does it mean to me ... to witness and participate in such an enactment, such an act of ... cultural appropriation ... if it can be called that. Oh, what a knot there is in my stomach which needs to be untangled!

Throughout the mass, the audience - the congregation! - is asked to participate in the rituals, and our participation culminates in the Holy Communion: the receiving of the consecrated host, the body of Christ. One fool has already spilt the blood of Christ all over the church floor, now the other fools hand out chunks of broken bread - the host. I'm eating with some unease, remembering my time as a young ministrant in the Catholic church of a small West German village. I was twelve - and I was trying to be serious and solemn - and I couldn't stop giggling. Oh, I was serious about God - but the structured solemnity of church service made me laugh. It didn't bring me any closer to God.

And here I was, some twenty years later, in Middle Collegiate Church in NYC, chewing a piece of consecrated (or desecrated?!) bread, wondering what it meant to approach the Sacred through the medium of theatre. "If your heart is open, you will see." Matt's character reminded the audience, reminded me.



Fools' Mass at Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, 21st December 2008.
Photo: Fred Hatt.

Two days later, at 11am on Sunday, 18th January I was once more seated in a row of church pews, partaking in *Fools Mass*. This time, however, we were not in a church. The pews belonged to the Cell Theater, a small performance venue on West 23rd Street which accommodates an audience of up to 60 people. In the Cell something changed ... *Fools Mass* became more iridescent. I was delighted, engrossed. This time I could more clearly see the fools' struggle with the loss of their father, the one who gave them their guidance. I felt their pain, their struggle to make sense and to find meaning and direction in the celebration of the mass. The ensemble's presence made a more immediate impact, I felt more engaged, the fools' actions spoke strongly to my heart. When Matt's character once more made the round to collect donations from the congregation I wanted to give something, but I have nothing to give. My pockets were empty. - The hat, dangling from Matt's walking stick came nearer. I reached deep into one of my pockets and pulled out an imaginary coin ... and after some playful struggle which involved my balancing on top of a pew I placed the coin in the inside the hat. - As soon as I sat back

down an inner commentary momentarily distracted me from the mass. “Was it right to give when you had nothing? Why didn’t you think of bringing something? Were you pretending to give? Was the intention of giving enough? Was the act real or pretend? Was it appropriate?” If this had been a real collection, I could not have done what I did. – But was this not a real collection? If it wasn’t real, what would be the point? Any meaningful ritual must be ... wahrhaftig. In English ... truthful? What was Dzieci’s truth? What was Dzieci’s authority to conduct this ritual?

As I understood it, the potency of a ritual lay not only in its structure, content, props and setting but in the radiant presence of its guide, its shaman, its priest – the person of authority who had been inducted and initiated into the ritual and who could thus transmit its deeper meaning and intention. Yantras. Homeopathic remedies. Information. Only the initiated guide could provide the pure container, through which the transmission of potent in-form-ation could unfold. I would need to look closely into the inner workings of Dzieci. What was it that in-formed this eclectic group of people? What were they able to transmit? What was the basis of their authority?