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Z: A Meditation on Oppression, Desire and Freedom by Anne Szumigalski, Regina: Coteau Books, 77 pp. plus Foreword (includes photos from first production and interview), 1995

PER BRASK

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES have produced three of the most interesting free-verse plays written anywhere in the English-speaking world. First there was Wilfred Watson's *Gramsci x 3*, followed by Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*, and now Anne Szumigalski's *Z*. All of these plays reclaim lyrical speech for the stage and show how heightened language serves performance and makes possible for readers and audiences an opening of the imagination that fosters both playfulness and seriousness while dealing theatrically with very difficult issues.

Z opens with a prologue during which we enter the play's themes, and the world of the concentration camp, via the chorus of prisoners, a taped voice and statements from individual characters. This section opens with a Female Voice stating, "And I'll tell you again and again the same story, / Once I was a child and once I was a woman. / A woman in a cage, a lynx in a trap." This section introduces us to a key issue of the play through exchanges such as:

MIMI: What's this What is this? who are you. Show your face: face of destruction: face of fury. Coward, coward, the flaccid face of fear. This is the face of the destroyed.

MALE: I am weary as a ditchdigger at the close of day. My head is a burden my shoulders can hardly carry.

SARA: Come yest your weary head between my breasts. Here beneath the skin is bone. Beneath the bone my heart beats like a bird. Feel here the bird in my bosom . . . your bone hand on my bone breast. The featherless bird beats its wings in the cage of my ribs.

The prologue ends with the Female Voice repeating, "And I'll tell you again and again the same story. Once there . . ." which is interrupted by a loud siren bringing us into the section of the play called "Desire."

"Desire" reveals that Sara and Mimi are women working in the sex hut to whose pleasures and comfort a number of men are rewarded for good behaviour, all that is except Z, Zigeuner, the Gypsy. The Kapo, Itzak, will not allow him in with his "uncircumcised prick." Z, we learn, is surviving in the camp because the Kommandant loves Gypsy music. In the same manner Itzak is surviving as a Kapo because he is a good story teller (once he was "Izzie of the Magic Tongue," "the funniest man in Dresden") and the Kommandant also loves hearing Jewish tales. Itzak also uses his skills to deflect Horst's (Herr Kaporal, a former school teacher) mean-spirited intentions. Sara, the former middle class woman, and Mimi, the former dancer, too, tell stories to each other, stories of their lives before the camp, in the Ghetto (Mimi), in the big house in the city (Sara). During "The Dance of Recognition," while Mimi does a striptease act for the men, Sara

and Z are captivated by each other. And when the others have exhausted themselves in dance they “take on renewed energy and take the Dance of Recognition to the edge of danger.”

The next section, “Victims,” focuses mainly on Itzak’s determination to survive to tell the tale of the horrors and Horst’s sense that they are all equally doomed. Says Horst, “When things get tough the Big Boys will call me up, forty-two years or not. . . . What’s the difference, a sniff of gas, a piece of shrapnel in the chest.” The stakes for Itzak’s survival are increased as the trains with new prisoners come in and Horst decides to give Itzak responsibility for the selection of who’s to go directly to the showers.

At the opening of act two, “The Gardens,” we find ourselves in the 1960s when the camp has been turned into a memorial park with bandstand and all. It has become a place where people can relax, have a picnic and do Tai-chi. Here we meet Julie and Coralie (played by the same actors as the ones playing Sara and Mimi), a young woman and her aunt, tourists doing “One city, one day the Heidigger [sic] way.” They are guided through the park by Benny, a huckster who makes his money off tourists and who refers to WWII as “the late conflict.” Though the mass graves are marked by tablets, all the old buildings holding incinerators have been razed and in their stead are playground and pool. Where the soap factory was are now botanical gardens.

The next section, “The Telling,” brings us back to the camp where Sara and Mimi comfort each other in the face of their despair. Itzak tells Horst a story about a wise man who when sought for advice would answer his petitioner with an even greater question. Sara wants to wash herself with soap made from the fat of prisoners to avoid getting crabs. Mimi stops her and teaches her that spit will do the trick, “if I could kill a brownshirt as easily as a brown bug I’d spend all my days spitting, and my nights too.”

In the section titled “Bread Dance—Tango of the Starving,” Sara and Mimi enter “in the characters, but not the costumes, of Coralie and Julie.” The chorus have taken positions as musicians on the bandstand. Julie is eating an ice cream. The band plays a passionate tango and Julie’s ice cream is replaced by a hunk of bread. A struggle for possession of the bread ensues.

In the epilogue Horst and Itzak toss a ball between them. It turns out to be an orange, something Itzak hasn’t seen in years. He begs to be allowed to hold and smell it for awhile. Horst, however, peels the orange and stuffs it in his mouth. Then he calls for a selection. Itzak calls out numbers. The prisoners undress. Ready to go to their deaths. After each of them has thrown a pail of water against the backdrop, the play ends with the Female Voice reciting the poems that began the play.

Dramaturgically, Z works by the chorus, the prisoners, framing the story as individual members break out to enact specific scenes. This allows for a relatively naturalistic characterization of the individuals which enhances both the verisimilitude of the description of the concentration camp and the emotional connection which the audience and reader can establish to the story. At the same time the chorus is a constant reminder that this is not only a story of individuals but also of communities. The poetry and the dance also bring the experience to a deeper spiritual and metaphorical level, a level at which the audience and reader recognise that below the level of individuality lie levels of commonality, levels which allow us to identify with the horror and despair we witness on the stage or on the page.

Z is thus, in my estimation, a major dramatic achievement. Szumigalski's integration of poetry, dance and drama is so effective that she has managed to put an experience on stage which not only makes you think about the horrors of the past but also about the callousness and dangers of the present. She sounds a wake-up bell, telling us to stay vigilant.