

BBC: 'Meet the 'professional mourners' united in grief', by Vincent Dowd, 19 April 2018

Meet the 'professional mourners' united in grief

By Vincent Dowd
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HUGO GLENDINNING/TARYN SIMON PROJECTS

Deep below London, a unique artistic venture is taking place. American artist Taryn Simon has brought together professional mourners from around the world - from Azerbaijan to Venezuela - for a musical performance that investigates how cultures lament the passing of those we loved.

Several times a day, a small crowd assembles on a pavement next to a nondescript doorway in north London. The big grey doors look like something a builder put up in a hurry.

But behind them, and down the steep concrete steps beyond, there's hidden an art installation which has been years in the making.

Michael Morris is co-director of Artangel, the organisation that's producing Taryn Simon's project An Occupation of Loss.

"We were delighted to discover a sort of underground folly in Islington half completed beneath a housing project," he says.

"It's three storeys deep and parts of it could almost be a lost Italian opera house. But it's also like an ancient amphitheatre made of concrete and breezeblocks.

"It's the perfect space for the extraordinary things Taryn is doing. I love the fact that a most no-one knew it was here."

Universal grief

To start each performance, the audience is led down in silence to a circular gallery, high above a central empty space. Around 20 performers emerge below and take up positions around the edge of darkness.

Singly, or in groups of two or three, the singers begin to wail or call out in their own languages. It is their chosen profession to mourn the dead.

The performers come from Ghana, Greece, China, Burkina Faso and Kyrgyzstan, among other places. For 45 minutes, the audience is left to wander freely as extraordinary waves of sound crash through the shadows.

Mainly it's a capella, although the sightless Anibal Gonzalez from Ecuador plays an accordion too.

The effect is enchanting, chaotic, mysterious - and at times frightening.



Taryn Simon says she started thinking about professional mourners seven years ago.

"It was something I encountered first in literature," she explains. "I was very aware that in places like the US or the UK, the notion of people being paid to attend a funeral service or wake to mourn on other people's behalf appears strange.

"There's certainly no website or agency who can put you in contact with professional mourners around the world."

This meant months of research with musicologists, anthropologists, linguists and other experts.

"I was thinking about how we organise ourselves in loss," Simon says. "In the culture I grew up in, the practices of loss are covered by civic or government rituals. And more recently it's shaped by media - look at how these moments now occur on Twitter

"Yet what you hear and see in the installation almost all derives from pre-Islamic and pre-Christian cultures. It's an ancient phenomenon which is still important outside the English-speaking world."

'Female focus'

A different version was seen two years ago in Manhattan, at the Park Avenue Armory arts venue

But in New York, An Occupation of Loss wasn't deep underground. Rather, the subterranean character in London reinforces the event's dream-like, even disturbing, effect.

The performers are all much in demand at home - Anibal Gonzalez gives his performance at up to five funerals a day. Some also perform their laments on stage.

Taryn Simon says the culture of mourning has a predominantly female focus.



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The mourners perform in the round as the audience explores the venue

"I soon realised gender plays a pretty big role in the profession. Some of the forms of mourning are performed only by women for women.

"Women are crying the uncried tears of the men because men are not allowed to cry.

"In some of these forms, the women have to face a wall and exhaust themselves in the process of grief, becoming a surrogate for male grief.

"It's often the case that their own mothers were professional mourners and now perhaps their daughters are too. I know it's been a meaningful experience for them to come to New York and London to meet people doing a similar thing on a different continent."

Simon says those who were brought up in other cultures have to make a mental leap to accept the validity of mourning someone you didn't know

"In some cases, the mourners even come to tears but there's nothing phony about that," she says.



This includes Afua Acheampomaah and Hanna Koduah, two performers from Ghana, where crying is seen as a tribute to the deceased. More crying represents more recognition.

They have several people in mind that allow them to achieve the emotional state you'll witness in the installation. In Ghanaian culture, what they do encourages a communal expression of grief

Greece is one European nation that retains a strong culture of performed mourning. The voices of Vangelis Kotsos, Nota Kaltsouni and Nikos Menoudak's echo through the space.

"What they're singing are old laments from ancient Epirus" she says

"Two of them will sing a scripted version of the lament while the third improvises around them with the voice of a bird. It's a pre-Christian practice which Sophocles wrote about, binding the story of a life to its after-life.

"But the lament can sometimes not be for the dead at all. It can talk about war or issues of immigration - but it connects us to the way people thought in Ancient Greece."

As audience members leave, they are handed a booklet which records the lengthy efforts to secure visas for each of the performers who've come to London. It deliberately ties ancient culture to today's political concerns.

"We live in complex times," Simon says. "An Occupation of Loss doesn't comment on that directly.

"But in New York my co-curator often felt like the State Department - they were the ones dictating who was allowed into the country to take part and who was not.

"Ultimately that disorientation and solitude is what I experience as the root of the piece."

An Occupation of Loss continues until 28 April.