

The Church of Dzieci by Jason Anthony

When the Church of Dzieci has an event, you drop everything.

What is the Church of Dzieci?

Very hard to describe. In its most basic shape, Dzieci is a group of performers who try to create sacred space. There isn't a lot of verbal, intellectual content to go on. Every event is different. But the group has worked with convents, churches, shaman around the world, and were featured at the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona along with leaders of many faith traditions.

One example. In their signature performance, the "Fools Mass", they enter a New York church (St. John the Divine among many others) dressed like medieval idiots. You are in the pews. They try to celebrate the mass, but without a priest it disintegrates into squabbling, idiocy and games. People of faith are often initially shocked and offended at the "performance" - but in the end, the "sacred" event that the fools strive to create is unintentionally beautiful, an apt metaphor of human failings, the universal "idiocy" of trying to be perfect in the eyes of God. Difficult and fascinating stuff.

They also, rarely, hold events. They're called "workshops", and - I'm warning you - you have to be really, really brave to attend. You enter, and basically allow them to involve you in a well-choreographed, non-verbal ritual that will probably involve your chanting, dancing, or just watching some really weird stuff unfold. For hours. It's the closest you'll come in the city to being an active member of a primitive religion.

The last event I attended was called "The Vigil", and it lasted four hours, with an option to stay overnight. At first you were led to a "cleansing" chamber, where your hands were washed, then to a room where people marched slowly. You join them. Over the next four hours, you follow; you learned a simple harmonizing chant, broken up by men and women, stood in a circle while mock combat unfolded in the center, wrapped a participant in a shroud, and got marked by a "sacred body painter". At this point most participants left, and those who remained reenacted a traditional peyote ritual until the dawn - without the peyote, of course. Did I mention that this was taking place in a Catholic girl's school on the Upper East Side, with nuns sleeping just doors away? You leave in a very altered state.

If you've seen "My Dinner with Andre," you have some idea of what to expect. Dzieci's founder, Matt Mitler, studied with Jerzy Grotowski, and the events are very much in that tradition. Grotowski based his ethos on the 20th century mystic G. I. Gurdjieff.

Dzieci is a must-do, a uniquely New York opportunity to see new religion and old in a spectacularly bizarre confrontation.