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## With a »brake« in Life, Perhaps, But Not on the Stage

Performance by Rok Kravanja and Via Negativa

**Rok Kravanja's first solo performance, "The Brake", is one of the few performance events in Slovenia that would operate with the real at a physical level and actually transpose the spectator into the time and place of a joint performance – reality.**

The content is simple enough: Rok Kravanja roller skates. When he used to roller skate with the brake, he roller skated with 'pussies', but once he threw the brake away, he was in with the blokes. And finally he embarked upon life. Like a "pussy" without the brake. Vulgarisms are unavoidable in this performance; else we would not only lose a vital dimension in terms of meaning but also the immediacy and the courage that characterize Rok Kravanja on stage.

In his first solo performance *The Brake* Rok Kravanja focuses on one simple and concrete idea with which he narrates a perfectly clear, easily intelligible story – a story about roller skating. Complete devotion to the selected idea, persistence in analyzing the story's potentials, and the performer's exceptionally strong presence all make this performance, in the broadest meaning of the term, a metaphor for life itself; life, which Kravanja enacts – if I borrow from the title – without the brake: directly and uncompromisingly.

If, most broadly speaking, the message runs between springing into action at one end and hesitation and prancing around on the spot, or using the brake, at the other, this does not apply to Kravanja's exceptionally competent engagement with demands he is up against as a performer. Nor does it apply to his ability to streamline the narrative, somewhat linearly perhaps, but with witty use of all its loops and always in a flirtatiously engaged dialogue with the audience – without any pretence, and sustaining a level of attraction that crosses the invisible fourth wall. The latter was removed from the start, since the audience sits in a circle that makes up a polygon for Kravanja's roller skating escapades and at the same time brings everyone present into a close associative connection with the social game, an activity rather, in which everyone participates. And truly, here, everyone participates – we all participate in a seriously risky game; the danger of crashing is oblivious to theatrical convention. Kravanja gives the spectator a clear signal; the wind you feel when he roller skates past you inside the circle with an astonishing speed, only a few centimetres away from your legs, tells you clearly enough that you are in fact unprotected. And even before that, when he is demonstrating in front of you how he learnt to roller skate with different techniques of stopping (against barriers, chairs next to you, people) and falling (for example an inch away from you, smiling, having just harmlessly brushed against you). It is clear, of course, that the audience's only protection lies with the performer's responsibility, his hundred percent concentration and precision in what he is doing. At the same time reality is constantly barging into the fictive situation and the risk is constantly present.

Kravanja deftly handles the risk, without any unexpected turns, taking the spectator on a classical dramaturgical trajectory towards ever increasing tension and final release which leaves – given the message – a bitter or at least a cynical aftertaste. But before that, the tension is absolutely real, as is the play – obvious to everyone – between reality and fiction, risk and protection, the chance of a real physical crash and above all the fictitious safety of the performative context addressed with a physically driven boldness and (self)ironic action. The performer is a leader of sorts and an engineer of spectators' emotions, who knows how to put himself on an equal footing also with his audience. That is precisely why he can build a situation, which is no longer theatrically fictitious, but rather collective, in which our emotions are engaged as much as our bodies, in a spontaneous automatic response no different to the response outside the theatre walls. The performance thus becomes an event, to which we are merged with the happening here-and-now as well as its surroundings, physically responding to every cue.

This specific and fortuitous relationship forged between the spectator and the performer, and established outside conventional theatrical norms as well as without recourse to those performative tricks – such that frighten the spectator with their interactivity or manipulate with the spectator's perception without really awakening him to the primary body response and which do not connect him to the collective experience – has lately become one of the more successful demarcations of contemporary performative arts (also of *Via Negativa*), concerned with nudging the spectator into a new awareness. With its specific rationale, *Via Negativa* offers also a specific interpretation, use and transformation of excess – in many of its previous projects it dealt with these more forcefully, obviously, spectacularly and driven by desire to shock – which it locates in the neuralgic spot of our contemporaneity, into what we can no longer find in the words or behind and between them, but in the surface of materiality, in action, in the body that does not merely display its usual hidden parts, but in a body as we know and see it, except that we now have to once again turn our attention to its inherent, often all too forgotten power, to its explosiveness and vitality together with all its faults and weaknesses.