Slovene director Bojan Jablanovec speaks about Not Like Me, a production that is provoking strong reactions from the public and is a part of the project Via Negativa built on the treatment of seven deadly sins.

Boris Kadin as a Croat and Kristijan al Droubi as a Serb shocked the public at the end of August in St Dominic’s Church in Zadar at the 11th International Festival of Contemporary Theatre Zadar Snova as they were stabbing each other on the stage in the course of the performance Not Like Me. Quite a few people from the audience left the theatre, and one girl fainted. An hour-long performance created an uproar among the public of a nation whose daily lives of the last decade of the twentieth century were exposed to images that were much more gruesome. Most unperturbed seemed to be the two actors, despite the fact that having just slashed each other’s hands to the sounds of music from Tarantino’s films they had to be rushed off to the hospital. Clearly the performance of Not Like Me has succeeded in testing the boundaries of perception of extreme happenings for which, or so it seemed, everything had already been said. The performance was directed by the well-known Slovenian director Bojan Jablanovec, the founder of the project Via Negativa built on the theme of seven deadly sins. Not Like Me is the sixth part of the sequel, presenting envy. The project was started in 2002, with the intention of treating one sin per year. The year 2009 anticipates the production of Via Nova, which will consolidate the previous seven.

In your production Not Like Me, Kristijan and Boris stabbed each other until they bled. Was bleeding part of the scenario or did it come about by accident?

The reference and starting point for the knife game is the performance of Marina Abramović called Rhythm 10, which she premiered in 1973 in Edinburgh. In contrast to Marina Abramović, who performed this to her own body, Boris does it to Kristijan and Kristijan to Boris. They split ten knives between them, so that each has five knives to work with. Blood is a constituent part of the scene. This demands from the performers a high level of concentration, exceptional control and great confidence in their partner.

The blood on the stage provoked many strong reactions in the media, many of which carried explicitly political overtones.

The political context is part of the story told by the performance and therefore the reactions in the media do not surprise me. The knife game is the last scene in the performance and at the same time the most destructive phase of envy, which constitutes the theme of the production. The finale in which Boris, the performer from Croatia, and Kristijan, the performer from Serbia, drive knives into each other’s fingers is a paraphrase of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, in which one brother is led to kill another due to God’s love. In Not Like Me Boris and Kristijan are locked into a bloody circle because of the love of the audience. In politics people kill for love of the nation. Too much love kills. In Not Like Me Boris is so enamoured with the theatre that he wants it entirely to himself, but Kristijan so much wants to get into the books of art history that he is quite prepared to cross the boundaries of imagination and transform the story made up by Boris into a blood game of reality.
The Zadar audience reacted fairly vehemently. To what extent can you predict in what way the viewers will experience the performance?

Since the primary field of our exploration is communication in the theatre, the strategies we adopt in our performances are always carefully considered and have a rationale behind them. That means that everything we do, we do very consciously, anticipating also all possible scenarios and reactions from the audience. So for us there haven't been any major surprises with the performances of Via Negativa so far.

In what way does this production present envy?

Envy is always a story about the other. About the other's qualities, achievements. Envy is one of the most deeply rooted and destructive urges that govern human behaviour. In Not Like Me the subject of envy is the love of the audience, a theatre theme par excellence. The theatre, the actors, the director – all of them thrive on the audience’s love. They all want that love for themselves and for some exclusive position with the audience. The production problematizes the ambition to always come out on top, to always come up with something new and original, to be in the centre of attention. This is the spiral in which we ourselves are caught and, wanting or not, have to play the part. Envy is, of course, always present; it can even be stimulating. But if in this game envy assumes the one and leading part, then this is the end to creativity. The goal of envy is not that we become like the person we are envying. The sole goal of envy is to destroy the other person.

Via Negativa deals with exploring the seven deadly sins. Why does the project carry this name?

First of all, Via Negativa is a project exploring theatre. The starting point of the project is to explore theatre as a medium of communication. In that sense what most interests us is the relation between the performers and the spectators. The audience in the theatre is always real, existing here and now – they come to the theatre with certain expectations, preconceptions, and stereotypes, bringing with them their personal and social histories, particular socially-conditioned fascinations, etc. All this is the subject matter with which we want to communicate. In order to do so, we need some general theme, a theme that is broad and basic enough to open up a space of mental communication for anyone who is willing to enter it. Seven deadly sins are the most basic negative characteristics of the human condition, with which every individual has some very personal relationship. On the one hand, as individuals we try to keep these negative urges under control, but on the other, we yield to their pressure. This is the civilizational conflict that operates in the intimate space of every individual. This is also the field within which the project Via Negativa is operating. By struggling with the negative we are trying to get to the essence of the human existence; to put it another way, we are trying to find our own answer to what makes humans human. The other part of the answer to your question about the name of the project relates to our principle of work, which is best summed up by the simple fact that we do not know what we are looking for, but we do know what we don't want. We are stripping theatre of everything we dislike about it and everything we find superfluous, so that in this way we might get to what we are looking for. Via Negativa (the negative way) is not about destruction, it is merely a way towards theatre as a medium of open communication.

With your productions you have radically taken the theatre in a new direction. What is it that the conventional theatre lacks, or what is it that the conventional theatre should be?
Classical theatre, say, stage theatre, is a big anachronism in our age of highly sophisticated media and technology that protects and sustains a national cultural politics with the argument that the cultural identity of a nation is at stake here. So, rather than making the theatre into the centre of living art, it transforms it into a museum. That is perfectly logical, in a way, since living theatre always opens questions for which no one has the answers; it points out things most people would prefer not to see; it broaches subjects no one wants to discuss. Theatre is a powerful medium, and in an age where our lives are increasingly digitalized, it is becoming more consequential than ever. Living theatre will always remind us that we exist, that we are flesh and blood and that life is a fascinating force that needs to be made the most of as creatively as possible. The problem with the conventional theatre is simple: it does not know what to do with theatre; it does not recognize how strong a medium it is dealing with. Or, if it does, it runs away, frightened of its own power.

The performers in your productions come from many different countries. Does that mean that you are looking for some surpassing expression that would bridge cultural differences?

You could say that. In principle I am looking for a basic language of the theatre. If you swim only in your own cultural pool, it is difficult to speak a universal language. On the other hand, I am convinced that art is in itself a universal language. My experience so far, working with performers from Ljubljana, Serbia, Croatia, Ireland, Belgium and Austria, only confirms that. Cultural differences have never been a hurdle or a centre of our attention. In a way, the cultural differences brought into – and merged with – our productions through various individuals are always a test and proof of the ambitions and goals of Via Negativa. For instance, the dimensions which the Serbian performers Kristijan al Droubi and Sanela Milošević have brought into Via Negativa could only be realized by them themselves, even though these are crucial for the development of the project as a whole.

What are the criteria that guide your selection of actors and what are the stages of any one of your productions?

In Ljubljana there is a group of actors permanently involved with Via Negativa productions. They constitute the nucleus of the project, whereas the selection of new performers takes place mainly at the workshops. The principle of selection is very simple – actors themselves will resign, when they realize they are in disagreement with the principle of work. But those who don’t give up and endure are the ones I finish collaborating with in a performance, for example, with the one now in Zadar, or I get them to work on the production we are now preparing in Ljubljana. The performers of Via Negativa are actors, performance artists, dancers … They are authors of their own work, which as a director I help structure and contextualize into a performance, bringing out what we wish to put across to the audience. Their task is to find a story and come up with a performing action through which they articulate a personal stance about the subject they are exploring. They must be willing to accept the method of work, which is that they themselves, their imaginations, their personalities, their bodies, are the subject of their work. This is the principle of performance art. The key question in any one production is how to be real, authentic in front of an audience. The process can take up to a whole year.

Any plans to visit Serbia with your project in the near future?

As we speak, a Via Negativa workshop on pride is being conducted by Sanela Milošević in the Cultural Centre Rex and I hope we will soon get a chance to meet the Belgrade audience.