ANDREJA KOPAČ

“I See Theatre, Above All, as a Sphere of Communication, not as a Medium of Aestheticisation”

Bojan Jablanovec is an economist and theatre director. He graduated in marketing in Maribor, then went to AGRFT (Academy for theatre, radio, film and television) in Ljubljana and took a degree in theatre direction. In his ten-year career as a theatre director in Slovenia and abroad, he has tackled, among others, Artaud’s Jet of Blood (Curek krvi) and Brecht’s Mr Puntila and His Man Matti (Gospod Puntila in njegov hlapec Matti). He directed Helios and The Triumph of Death (Triumf smrti) with Vlado Repnik. He staged the following performances in various institutional theatres: Stage Illusion (Odrska utvara), The House of Bernarda Alba (Dom Bernarde Alba), Disney the Ripper (Disney Razparač), The Sunset (Zaton), Hedda Gabler and Women Presidents (Predsednice). Having left repertory at the end of the millennium, he and Nana Milčinski developed a framework for the performative theatre in which he wanted to work in future; first he produced three pilot pieces (1999–2002: Lenora, Europe–the Girl Who Rushed Too Much (Evropa–deklica, ki je preveč hitela) and Olga Grad vs. Juannna Regina), and then established his own rules of the game with their attendant chronology. Via Negativa, in which the seven deadly sins are explored, is conceived as a journey of sorts to a skeleton of theatre devoid of the glamour of the stage. Its chronology spans seven years, with a new project every year. The three that have been staged so far deal with anger (Starting Point: Anger [Začetna točka: jeza], 2002), gluttony (More [Še], 2003) and greed (Incasso, 2004). The first fourth will explore lust (2005). The project Via Nova (2009) will round off the series. A number of things interested me, and my point of reference was Jablanovec’s idiosyncratic working methods. Hence, Via Negativa serves in this interview as a reference from which everything originates and returns, as an interface of the author’s ideas, linking disparate ideas, and offering new ones, a new path, which he will reach in 2009. In the meantime, his second project, the gluttony of More, has arrived at this year’s biennal in Venice.

**Via Negativa began with a departure from theatre as an institution, and with a venture, as you once put it, into a theatre without power. Why?**

Power is not to be understood too literally. If, as an artist, you choose to work outside institutions, this is, in a sense, a decision to work without power. If, however, you choose institutions, you also choose their ideological, methodological, production and financial apparatuses. The problem here is compatibility. After a decade of work in institutions, I realised that the modes of production in institutional theatre are not suitable for me. I am talking about a clash concerning production, rather than aesthetics. In my case, it was a conflict involving a sense of powerlessness, an inability to articulate what gives meaning to my work within the existing system of production.

**Is Via Negativa then a sort of departure from everything that the repertoire theatre entails?**

Via Negativa is simply a return, a backward glance cast towards the reasons, the meaning, the goal and objectives, as well as the methods of theatre as such. It is not about developing a different theatre or inventing a new stylistic paradigm. It is simply a reconsideration of the
meaning of theatre as a medium and an exploration of its mechanisms. Nowadays, I see theatre, above all, as a sphere of communication, not as a medium of aestheticisation. Institutional theatre, to some extent, underestimates the audiences – in terms of how it communicates with them and what kind of language it uses. Negativa is all about opening up theatre as a space of communication.

Why, then, does the last project, Incasso, significantly reduce the role of interaction among the actors, as well as in terms of a physical contact between the actors and the audiences? Why are there no relations?

The utopian stance of Via Negativa is a maximum control of the effects of the stage, for we can never predict with absolute precision what the individual will experience. What we can predict, however, are certain general moments, which we integrate into our expectations, so there are no surprises. It is not true, though, that there are no relations; it is just that Incasso implements them in a more subtle way than More, which employs a convention that is closer to dance, the simultaneity of individual performances, and the conventions of talk show entertainment. Interaction is deeply embedded in conventions of performing arts – theatre is all about the simultaneity of performance and reception. Via Negativa explores precisely the relations between the actor and the spectator; however, not by dint of physical interaction. In theatre, this can quickly lead to the opposite effect – instead of enticing the spectator, it puts him off, it loses him, so to speak. The spectator comes to the theatre for some sort of experience; however, one in which he does not expect to participate physically. Theatre conventions are crystal clear in this respect: the spectator embodies a passive presence, whereas the actor is active. The actor is the entity supposed to do something with himself, on behalf of the spectator, in order for the latter to experience something. The two are diametrically opposed; hence, they attract each other; however, they must not transgress their respective boundaries physically; they must protect their positions. Ideally, these two types of logic overlap. In order for this to happen, however, certain subtle strategies must be deployed. Theatre takes place within the spectator, not in front of him. In Incasso, the physical contact with the spectator is transposed into the presence of his money on stage. The basic premise of this project is to construct the performance as a structure into which the act of looking is integrated as meticulously as possible. What this entails is that the performer tries to predict the effects of his actions as accurately as possible and to control them through his performance. He must be aware of the context of looking at all times.

Are you pushing the envelope here?

I don’t think so. It is all a matter of the degree to which the performer is willing to expose himself, and this is what I follow. The performers, however, do have the task of exposing themselves beyond the point of generality, the task of stepping out in front of the audience with an utterly personal presence and a statement. Every performer must justify his presence on stage, he must have a just cause for his presence in front of the spectator, which is what every performer in Negativa has spent a long time contemplating. His task, on behalf of me as the spectator, is to perform something that I, the spectator, anticipate yet never demand.

Is this how you function as a director, when you are in the process of creating a performance?

Yes, I function as a voracious spectator. If you are inviting someone to the theatre, you have aroused certain expectations and you need to meet them with the performance. If you fail to do this, performing is pointless. This is why some performances are moving towards a radicalisation of the presence on stage, towards a ruthless exposure of oneself. In fact, it is all about affirming the meaning. Nothing else but yourself renders you meaningful on stage.
Do you ever feel that putting yourself in the role of a voracious spectator is a form of manipulation, that you are letting the performers know what you expect?

No, not at all. If this were the case, theatre direction as such would amount to ugly, rude manipulation. It is about a certain logic of consensus, which presupposes that every performer on stage wants to be seen. If we are watching a classical performance, we are not here to see Hamlet, but rather the actor who performs the role of Hamlet. Hamlet always withdraws in favour of the actor, for the spectator is always on the look-out for a difference between the role and the actor and he relishes the moment when he sees the actor in the role. Via Negativa deals with the spectator through the logic of this relation between a statement and the act of making a statement on stage, for the spectator is the key catalyst in establishing this relation and he fills up the abyss between them. This is the point of what we do. We explore how things put on display are seen, we are searching for variety within this process. These differences are what is performed on stage.

How do you understand the role of multimedia projects in this context?

To me, multimedia projects are, above all, about the ambition to liberate the spectator, who is supposed to have the option to receive the message through various media; however, a counter moment often occurs in this process. What transpires is a certain saturation, disorientation, dispersal. The use of multimedia within a medium, in my opinion, conveys a lack of ability to make the most of the medium in which you exist. In terms of the act of performing, theatre exists as a concentrated sphere of power, fixed gazes and the audience’s expectations. If you are aware of this power of the medium, you must use it as a springboard. You are expected to know how to use this power in a manner that communicates with your temporal coordinates. In Negativa, we use as our springboard theatre as such, its live presence.

Do you, nevertheless, see a possible exit here?

I feel no need to subvert this convention, I am merely trying to use it in as productive a manner as possible. I am looking for material that would lead me to a logical way of connecting the spectator and the performer, these two diametrically opposed presences that have a common goal. In More, I found it productive to introduce the talk show host. It turned out that the performer as the bearer of the statement cannot address the audience in such a casual manner as the host – the spectator always thinks that the performer has an ulterior motive. The host, however, merely performs his function, that is, he orchestrates the spectacle. In this way, I try to expand the conventions of theatre; I am introducing other conventions, however, ones that theatre can keep up with. In Anger, we integrated conventions of gallery spaces; in More, we introduced the talk show host; Incasso deploys money to this end.

Do you see the attempts to redefine space, to cross from one context into another, to open up new spheres and to explore the medium in your performances as political?

I don’t really understand the concept of politics in this context. Every form of performing on stage is potentially political. Money with its exchange value is nothing but a medium of control, which in a theatrical event can lead to the point in which personal statements become simultaneously ideological because they lay bare these hidden regulatory mechanisms. When the actor, using money, performs a personal attitude towards greed or the strategies of resisting greed, he also articulates the way in which he surrenders to the system or the way in which he defies it. This is where a hidden political nucleus resides.

What interests you most in this context?
For instance, the fact that within each sphere that Via Negativa opens up there is a distinct conflict. For lust, for example, we are using the notion of the instinct as a working definition – the instinct that is directed towards the body of the other; however, it has to be sublimated, or else it would be socially unacceptable. These levels of social acceptability are the source of short circuits in the individual's identity. When the performer feels that an intimate, personal conflict is crossing its boundaries and becoming a presentation of some general relations, this is when things become very interesting.

**Interesting for whom – for you, the spectator, or for the performer?**

For everybody: for the spectator, for me, and for the actor who in this moment feels the power of theatre, which gives him the right to speak out in a personal manner in a public space. Theatre as a medium not only grants him this right – it demands this from the performer. This is the purpose of the performer, his essence. And this is not a form of social critique, but rather a form of discerning one's position in society; in fact, it is a critique of oneself, of the individual who consents to these relations.

**Does it ever happen that somebody backs off?**

Of course, there are also retreats. You can always exercise your right to freely leave the project. All performers are aware of this possibility from the very beginning. In some stages, our work demands a radicalisation of stage action, and those unable to do so quickly become aware of the fact that descriptive performance does not tally with the overall code of the project. Everybody makes his own decisions and sets up his personal limits to which he is prepared to expose himself in front of the spectator.

**The project Via Nova, comprising seven performances, will take place in 2009. In what way can this project be seen as transcending theatre as we know it?**

The most significant aspect, I think, is the fact that we are trying to introduce the practice of performance into the conventions of theatre in a methodological manner. In this sense, the degree to which the performer in this project is willing to expose himself, without requiring an authoritative reference to amplify his meaning, is also excessive. In the working process we are using the practice of performance, whereas the results are rendered within the conventions of theatre. This is why the performers in the first three projects created predominantly solo acts. It is, however, also possible to do duets or groups, which is something we are going to tackle further.

**Are you?**

Yes. We are already doing this with lust, because we define the latter as a disposition towards the body of the other. This entails that each performer in his act must speak through an action directed towards the body of the other, which opens up entirely new areas. Every new project of Negativa attempts to find a new realm related to its subject-matter. The problem under consideration is our starting point. This is never a formal decision, it is always related to the content. Save for reduction, there are no formal limitations.

**How do you choose the performers?**

I find them in agreement with the rest of the team. If truth be told, I wish they would choose me; that would make the issue of the performer's motive clear right from the beginning. I am interested in specific individuals, by which I don't mean their competence as actors, dancers or performers, but rather their willingness to enter the process of Via Negativa. Every
performer, right from the start, knows exactly what he is expected to do. From the necessity to expose oneself personally to the basic approach through the logic of performance, which means that the actor functions as the author as well as the material of his scene – in short, as a performer.

**And generally, most of them decide to join in – except when there are technical obstacles?**

During the working process, especially in workshops, people often leave projects. This results either from the fact that it was sheer curiosity that brought them there in the first place and that this curiosity has been appeased, or from the fact that they realise that their perception of theatre differs from ours and they simply leave. At the moment, I am putting together a team in Zagreb; they are actors and dancers, and the invitations and information circulate via e-mail, personal contact and conversation. Before serious work begins, we meet and talk at least a couple of times. Sometimes it happens that after the first discussion somebody wants to participate, but after the next meeting this is no longer the case. Some people leave the project even during the working process, for they find the methods too stressful.

**What about the group of Belgians who worked on scenes for More which were eventually not included in the performance?**

Ah, the Belgians…This was a peculiar situation. We started developing the idea to have two teams working in parallel on the same topic. The Belgians came up with some really interesting stuff. In Antwerp, their project was staged in a gallery, and tried out in a supermarket; in Ljubljana, we decided to perform More in theatre. The result was a huge discrepancy. When they came to Ljubljana, I thought two weeks would suffice to find a common denominator for our scenes. We immediately started working and achieved a lot in a week. However, as it turned out, we spoke two entirely different languages; they were in an altogether different film, so to speak.

**In what way?**

Their language suddenly became too metaphorical, whereas we tried to speak in very concrete terms, and we deliberately avoided metaphorisation. The combination simply did not work. What I deemed most important was to uphold our initial criteria, hence I was forced to decide...

**So who makes the decisions – the team or you?**

Eventually, I do, of course – this is the director's task; however, I do run everything by the team. The majority realised that it wouldn't work, and we learnt our lesson. It didn't happen again with the Serbians. In June, after the workshop, one of the actresses left, but Kristijan, Sanela and I kept working on the scenes via e-mail and in accordance with what was going on in Ljubljana. Which is why Kristijan and Sanela joined the performance in Ljubljana without any trouble. After this experience, I am sure the Belgian one cannot happen again. The problem was my approach.

**Communication malfunction?**

Precisely – the Belgians did not start from exactly the same premise as the team in Ljubljana. I was aware of that, but I did not expect this to drive us apart to such a degree. Now, I insist on every performer knowing exactly what the task is about. The problem, the method and the objective must be defined with utmost precision and we need to stick to them. Every performer must also accept the possibility that they might not take part in the final
production if his performance does not meet certain criteria.

**What is your vision for this kind of liaising in future?**

In future, I am interested in linking disparate cultural spaces. For instance, I would like to develop a project with Slovenian, Japanese and Senegalese people. So far, I have had experience with people from Belgium, Austria and Serbia, and I am working with Croats at the moment. I have no idea where they are going to lead me. In Celovec, I started working with five people, but at the end only Oliver remained on board. One actress, for example, left the project because of a methodological requirement: she was not to discuss or explain her work-in-progress to us, the observers, whereas we were obliged to comment on how her performance communicates with us, what it conveys and how it affects us. According to her, I was a fascist. I said to her, come on, these are simple requirements. But she could not understand that this kind of work enables her to find her own, authentic strategy of conveying her message through a thoughtful stage gesture. The problem emerged, of course, when we did not understand her performance and I did not want to hear her explanation. For her, this was utterly unacceptable.

**Despite the homogenisation of cultural spaces, there are still differences stemming from language and manifested in gaps, places of indeterminacy, tolerated in some milieus but not in others. What do you think about this?**

This is precisely what I am interested in. But I have to deploy different strategies in different environments to get the results that interest me. In Novi Sad, the strategy was different from the one I used in Ljubljana. Communication there was much more direct, the whole thing was very productive. There are things that I put on hold in Ljubljana, simply because I think it is wiser to do so. Conversely, in Serbia, I felt that the passing of time easily creates hysteria. If something is left up in the air, people become hysterical. I really wonder how I would act in Japan, or somewhere in Africa, and how I would need to conduct the work there to be able to unite the performers in a coherent stage event within a week. If I succeeded in bringing them to the point where everyone would speak the language of Via Negativa, the differences between them would be precisely what I would relish most.

**Do you think the control over effects allows drawing parallels with marketing?**

The key premise of marketing is to consider the possible interpretations of a message on all levels. This entails controlling effects, monitoring reception, in short, anticipation. In art, the strategy is the same! If you don't take this into account in theatre, you are naïve! For instance, if you don't realise that somebody might find something naïve or ridiculous, you have forgotten something. You are creating a performance the audience won't buy. For example, somebody must die on stage and he is only thinking about how to die; he has forgotten that he is performing death. A commercial brand cannot afford such amnesia; it knows that it must communicate in concrete terms and that it cannot make any mistakes as regards what it promises to deliver. Art projects are similar. They cannot afford to make mistakes as regards promises and expectations, they must anticipate.

**Is this your main objection as regards institutional theatre? That it pays too little attention to issues of this kind?**

Absolutely. The why is usually completely marginalised; the aesthetic moment, the how, is continually problematised, whereas the why is answered in the form of flowery repertoire politics. Otherwise, however, I think Drama, for instance, functions fantastically. It produces monumental dramatic texts and attracts large audiences. This is the culture of the protocol, and the state, its founder, can be perfectly happy. The audiences that attend Drama probably
will not visit Negativa. In Špas teater, for example, a perfect parallel world has transpired. It indicates how much potential theatre harbours. Its audiences have not been stolen from any other theatre. When I first visited it, it was sheer pleasure. Not just the performance – the event itself, the audience! After a long time I felt the immense power of theatre again.

You argue that people go to theatres for a certain experience; and yet, you describe your project as a theatre of non-emotions. How come?

This is a different issue. Affect is always the effect of performing. In every instance, emotions are the basic perceptual space of theatre. What varies are the strategies of soliciting emotions. Some people choose emotions as the stuff of performing, and thus attempt to elicit the spectator’s compassion. In Negativa, we have chosen a different strategy. I do not want to see emotion on stage; I feel pleasure when I feel emotion arising within me...

Generally speaking, the critics always want to assert their superiority over performance.

It is the vocation of the critic to understand the impact of the performance and to evaluate it within a certain referential framework. The problems arise when the critic’s referential framework has nothing to do with the performance, or when it is too narrow, or unintelligible. This is when, willy-nilly, the reader thinks that the point of the exercise is nothing but a self-indulgent intellectual tirade. The critic who uses the critique to prove his superiority over the performance writes about and for himself. No one benefits from such a critique – neither the artist nor the spectator.

You have chosen your own path – transcending the logic of theatre production and aimed towards a final point, Via Nova 2009. What can you tell us about this?

The seven years of exploration in Via Negativa are geared towards shedding light on the rationale and the meaning of theatre, towards opening up as many strategies as possible regarding how to deploy this basic theatrical set up in which the spectator and the actor meet, and to think about what is expected from this situation nowadays. The exploration will be rounded off with the performance entitled Via Nova and the seven preceding projects are nothing but the material for the eighth project. I imagine the spectator receiving a DVD with all the material integrated in the performance. I hope to incorporate the mechanism of production into the performance itself. I have yet to see a performance that lays all its working material into my hands and, at the same time, displays its results. In short, these seven years are meant to generate a certain new logic of production.

What is this new logic of production based on?

Esentially, it is a corollary of our methodology, our working mode. What we do is, above all, a contemplative process with no rehearsals. The key methodological requirement of Negativa is for every performer to immerse himself in this process, structure his act and then perform it. The stage is used as a medium of testing, not as a space of improvisation or investigation. This is why we are able to circumvent a whole series of classical theatrical approaches, and we can use the rehearsals exclusively as a forum for testing the effects and as a space of intuition. Dance, for instance, entails the training of the body; Negativa is the training of thought processes. If possible, I insist on traditional rehearsals being totally replaced with thinking through ideas. Eventually, I wish to divorce theatre production from the logic of rehearsal, although this of course does not rule out some work on stage. We usually meet on stage twice a week; the entire duration of the preparations is seven months. The other important thing are workshops. The dynamics of work is totally different, I am trying to stick to the 3×3 principle (three days per month for three months). I hope other members of
Negativa will join me in organising the workshops in future. Thereby, several teams could work on a project concurrently and we would meet at the end and structure the performance.

And what do you see as your role as a director in future?

The director must invest a lot in the strategy of the project. He is not the author, but rather the strategist. He must create suitable conditions for achieving the set goals. Perhaps one day I could transpose the creative process into a virtual dimension. I believe e-mail could facilitate the creation of performances with people all over the world. With the development of wireless video technologies, this is not impossible. The performer could record his act and send it to everyone on the project's mailing list, and everyone could provide him with their observations, opinions and associations so that the performer could continue his work. I am convinced we could get great material by doing so. Only at the very end we would need to meet somewhere and switch over into the physical reality. I can see no reason why theatre could not function in this manner in future.

It seems that a lot of our projects start off quite well, but then get somewhat lost during the production.

This is predominantly a matter of ideational fitness, the problem of how to keep a certain idea alive. The director's key task is to maintain his idea. Projects do not usually fail because of the performers or because of financial problems; the problem is the director, his inability to sustain his strategy, to achieve the desired effect. If, for instance, I make a false move, I must admit and rectify my mistake as soon as possible. I used to do the opposite; that is, I used to insist on mistaken suppositions, although I knew they were wrong, but I hoped they would yield results nevertheless. Nothing good ever turned out. Direction is basically a strategy of achieving something I know almost nothing about. I believe methodological discipline is crucial and I always insist on it. Only thus can I achieve a satisfactory result.

We are still fairly disorganised as regards planning in the field of art production. What is the story in your case?

If you choose to explore, you must have a plan, you must create manageable working conditions and a precise referential framework, and you must insist on them. If you persist, you will achieve something in the end. In any case, planning in art is mandatory. Art is business like any other. Nobody, be it your colleagues or the producers, can work with you seriously if you don’t know what you are doing tomorrow. I know exactly what I am doing in March 2009, for example; I will start working on the final act of Via Negativa, the performance called Via Nova. Every performer who has ever worked on Negativa knows what to do then. This is why they must prepare their acts in such a manner that they will be able to perform them then and without too much trouble. After a finished project, everybody must record his act in the form of actions that describe his act with precision, and the act must be constructed in such a manner that it would function even if the performer were somebody else. If it did not function, it would mean that not everything had been thought through. This is what we tested with copies of performances in The Point of Departure: Anger. Interesting deferrals emerged, but the act always functioned. And I believe it will be the same in 2009 with Via Nova, even if not all performers are there.

Translated by Polona Petek.

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