Ten years of research, sins and excesses of Via Negativa

In 2002 Via Negativa held its first performance Anger in the Modern Gallery of Ljubljana and a few days ago, at the very same location it rounded off a decade of its continuous creativity, which had confronted Slovene theatre with a new set of aesthetic and thematic questions with the event No One Should Have Seen/Heard This. Under the constant watch of the director Bojan Jablanovec, Via Negativa has primarily redefined the relationship between the audience and the performers, shattering the performer’s private and public image in the process, while researching select thematic clusters in intense laboratory workshops.

When Via Negative first ‘broke onto’ the Slovene theatre arena, it presented a strong opposition to the then established theatre production and politics. The studies devoted to individual productions would last a year, and the results would be based on exhaustive group work; the director’s mark was never authoritarian but rather cooperative; excesses were the norm, and the audience became vulnerable as opposed to being sunk in the safety of the dark, often times ideologically attacked and subject to an avalanche of self-questioning about their own status and intention.

Two main streams that went into the building of Via Negativa’s character worked on the one hand to expose man’s archetypal sediments, while on the other prodded the spectator in the very practical sense, by changing his passive role as spectator into commenting or even into performing activity.

With this two-way communication Via Negativa effectively eschewed the trap of self-sufficiency, predictability and a mannered relationship with the audience. Not only did the projects delve deeply into select topics, but the artistic team had at all times invested amply into an overall development of the signifying and symbolic complexity of the contemporary performer as also into the spectator’s sensibility and readiness (or not) for excesses.

Via Negativa had never smugly pretended that as an ‘alternative’ it can survive without an audience and it had never been ashamed to admit that is it here because of us. It is fully aware that a theatrical experience is memorable when bold, hazardous while at the same time down-to-earth, personal and compassionate, with communication not being centred on the final stage product but enmeshed in the unfolding collective theatrical event – in being literally welded to the auditorium.

Three thematic stages

By systematically treating deadly sins – what begun in 2002 with the seven-year-long project Seven Performances – Seved Deadly Sins – Via Negativa announced a specific performative language which marked a radical departure from the established, traditional theatre currents then prevalent in Slovenia. What additionally contributed to the innovativeness was also the generational and international diversity of the performers, which to this day can be
understood as a mark of a “collective's independence” with which Via Negativa encouraged complete autonomy, uniqueness and independence of individual performers regardless of what their professional career or status might otherwise be (in the familiarity of the Slovene environment establishing this stance is by no means self-evident nor simple).

Between 2002 and 2008 performances on the subject of anger, gluttony, greed, lasciviousness, sloth and pride lined up one after another. They were based on the principle of collage entities with performers enacting their pieces from a personal angle, often drawing on autobiographical experiences and with effects of therapeutic cleansing. Precisely these kinds of strategies then served as a reliable base for experimentation with, and development of, the various acting, thematic and aesthetic questions. These were carried further in 2009 in a new series entitled Via Nova, while the central axis turned on the relation between a counterfeit and the original, between the old and the new, between creation and destruction. The series Via Nova gave rise to twenty new shows (often realized in museums or galleries), in which the performers elaborated upon their previous points of interest, seeking out in themselves as well as the performer the anxiety and the pleasure through the phenomenon of repetition.

At this particular moment Via Negativa is at its third stage, in the process of Irresolvable, in which the performers’ central focus is directed at the current political and cultural situations, at the resolvability of the ideological dilemmas and subsequent frustration on the part of the nation that is being offered and advised to rebel.

**Via Statistics**

In the ten years Via Negativa realized 48 projects, with over 80 performers participating from Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Poland and Denmark. Over half the projects emerged out of a coproduction or partnership with over 20 different theatres, venues and festivals. They performed over 200 shows at festivals in Slovenia and abroad and travelled to 21 European countries and the USA.

**No one should have seen this**

The title No One Should Have Seen This was to accompany not only the event celebrating their decade-long presence on the performance scene but also the latest monograph and exhibition in the Modern Gallery. The exhibition is conceptualized as a video installation, offering excerpts from the Via Negativa performances, but in a deliberately disconnected retrospective manner, for a number of video inserts are shown simultaneously, and disjointedly in a characteristic line of 'ViaNegativa's' excesses and following a logic that tends to conceal the essence of what is being shown deep under the surface of the presentation itself.

The monograph No one should have seen this (Zavod Maska, urednik Bojan Jablanovec, 270 pp.) is also organized following a retrospective order. A walk, let alone a reading, through it turns out to be a labyrinth that barely allows for a moment of ‘respite’, but rather drives the reader onward into accepting the game of shrewd dramatic manipulation. Besides the exceptional photo material (Marcandrea) and a chronological survey of all the performances accompanied by short introductions, there is also a substantial essay by Blaž Lukar entitled “Erasing the Audience” and interviews with Via Negativa's performers done by Marin Blažević.