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»Urinating On The HNK Was Necessary«
The Seven Deadly Sins of Bojan Jablanovec

Five years ago Bojan Jablanovec founded the theatre project called Via Negativa which annually focuses on one of the basic human attributes as defined by the deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, wrath, greed, sloth. He says that the mechanisms and strategies of defense against the sins are core defining factors of and individual's identity and one of the universal agents of human nature. So far, he and his international team, dominated by Slovene actors, have presented Wrath, Gluttony, Greed, Lust, Sloth and Envy. The project has received numerous acknowledgments both at home and abroad, but has also spurred scandals. Male masturbations on stage, urinating on the HNK stage, an actors extreme overeating, hammering a nail into the penis, a knife-play that draws blood… are just some of the scenes that have guaranteed Bojan Jablanovec’s Via Negativa a lifelong core of fans or relentless adversaries.

It’s five in the afternoon. Which of the seven deadly sins tested you most today?

This morning, I had a discussion, connected to what I am currently preparing myself for. Therefore: pride, as Pride is the next project of Via Negativa.

How did it test you?

How did the sin test me? In 2009 we will attempt to create a synthesis of the seven years of Via Negativa, entitled Via Nova. Pride tempts me to regard what I do as something more important, something more than it really is. So I must keep curbing my own conceit – that I am more important than I really am.

What do you mean?

I think it is important to constantly keep in mind the facts of who you are and where, what you know and what you don’t. When you cross the line and believe your own ego, you simply loose touch with reality. The entire project of Via Negativa is testimony to the fact that one must always maintain one’s connection to reality intensively. In this sense pride tests me – it is connected to my work and what I am attempting to achieve by it. I am always trying to achieve more.

Don’t the actor’s narratives – as personal as they are, perhaps even more so than in their private lives – qualify as “more”?

For some people perhaps, for others not so. For some this is a step backward, away from art, for others it is a step beyond. To me, each opinion is valuable information about what we do. But we could also mention pride again. Why is someone certain that he can step on stage and talk about himself? That is the moment when we find ourselves on slippery ground… Why do we believe we can do this? The simplest answer lies in that societal roles have been assigned and someone must do this, too.

The Via Negativa project declaratively abandons aesthetics in lieu of ethics. One of
the performers in Wrath tells us a story of how he lost his parents in a car crash, which really happened. His intimate tragedy is shared with the spectators. Who is he testing: us or himself?

It’s very simple. Each man is his own story. Each tells what they are ready to tell. If an actor dredges up a story he finds necessary to tell what he wants to tell, no moralizing is necessary. An ethical imperative is necessary: that only those with something to say and show may step onto the stage. Via Negativa discusses things other will not or dare not show or talk about, even if they may wish to. To me, theatre is a space in which we, the creators are on stage in order to talk or do instead of the spectator, to sin if you will, for him and in his name. This is why the spectator comes to the theatre, because we are prepared to do this instead of him. If we do it right, the spectator is ready to see himself in a way he would otherwise not want to.

Considering the fact that you are dealing with pride – would you be ready to step on stage in a few hours and interpret it? Where are your own personal stories in Via Negative and its seven sins?

Is this the classic question of what a director does in a project like this?

Not really...

In each of the performances I am present where and when the time comes to contextualize everything that has been said and done in the process. This is my work in the practices of Via Negativa. You are not he first to want to see me on stage – I get similarly provoked by the performers I work with. But I am no actor or performer. I am much more effective behind the stage than on it.

The man in the background?

This is not about modesty!

Are you back there in order for others to express themselves?

No! Not at all! I want to be good alongside them. And again: this is not about modesty! More likely it’s about the opposite – being overly confident. Only alongside them can I do what I would never be able or willing to do myself.

Via Negativa is a theological term. How do you interpret it?

It is proving the existence of God through what God isn’t. Via Negativa is not a proof against the existence of God. It is only a process through which, by proving what God isn’t, one comes to the dimensions of what God could be. Such an argumentation for God came about as a result of understanding that understanding God is impossible. The dimensions of the divine surpass the capabilities of the human mind.

How do you transfer such argumentation to the stage?

I cannot stand definitions of theatre – what is theatre. Theatre is an open space. In truth, every definition of theatre is too narrow. Which is why I rather think about what theatre is not.

One of the notions is that the spectator is God in the theatre, isn’t it?
This is the notion that, even though it’s rather old, was our basis for envy. In our last performance, Four Deaths, we interpreted envy as the relationship between two individuals, opening toward a third. For this, we used the Abel-Cain-God paradigm, which is about the two of them attempting to achieve their own confirmation through divine love. Because Cain does not receive it, his envy causes an act of destruction: fratricide. If theatre is about the public liking us (we wish to inspire admiration, interest and approval) then the spectators are in the position of God, divine love, then we asked ourselves – who is our Abel... We found him in the field of contemporary performing arts. We sought out the big names of the European and World stages in any way connected with the work we do or the performer himself. Thinking about who God is in theatre can, through the prism of pride, quickly transform itself: pride culminates in the moment, when the actor sets himself as God. Everything he does, he does to elevate himself above all else. We talk about this a lot in Via Negativa.

**Is the feeling that in Via Negativa, the quality of art is born through torture and suffering, the correct one? Is that what sets the audience’s approval in the end?**

It’s hard for me to agree. Every work of art that desires to persevere is hard and serious work. I allow that artistic surplus may come about as an idea. But how will you surpass in the next performance? In this, a component of, if you will, torture or hard work is present. Otherwise – all art is a battle with oneself. On all levels. How much do you demand from yourself? How do you respond to an audience’s demands?

**The audience can also be discriminatory toward and artist...**

They can. But in historicizing art, which is getting quicker all the time, artists ourselves must make sure that thing fall into place. But of course this never happens when we want it to. Always too late or too soon. But whoever blames the audience for this is, I believe, actually arguing with himself.

**Considering that Via Negativa comes from theology, do you feel a certain “godliness” in your work. Do you discuss it?**

Not at all. From the very start, we have been avoiding theological or catholic contexts.

**All right, but you are dealing with internal existential problems of man, as collected and recognized in the seven deadly sins by christianity.**

First and foremost, I understand the seven sins as elementary expanses of an individual’s existence, which law and religion have denoted as negative. In reality, these are the areas that define an individual indelibly. Everyone must form an opinion of them and it is the relationship toward the negative that defines one as a personality. To me, this is the area that defines man as man and decisively structures all societal relationships in which one lives. What is the judicial system? It controls and via repressive mechanisms dominates all these seven areas. This is the reason we are doing the seven sins cycle: because they determine the everyman and the entire western-christian society.

**Via Negativa is a project that should take place round the clock on the streets. Does it require theatre?**

It’s always a battle. A conflict we play out each day at home, at work, in the kitchen, in the toilet, with each other and ourselves. We succumb to our own wishes and slip into sin or keep resisting it. What we are looking for on the stage is the right story, gesture,
action with which to stage this conflict on ourselves. The authors always build from themselves, at a very personal level. One must always enter personally into a relationship with art. For instance, if someone says to me “I’m not lazy, look, I’m always working”, I answer: “Do you really think so? Through which laziness are you speaking now?” Once one enters the capillary system of one’s negativity, one discovers drives, which one doesn’t really even want to know about. This is when one discovers sloth, envy, pride … The performer must have the capability to untangle this from himself, to let and force it through his body in order to inhabit the audience with its presence.

On your website, you say that “Via Negativa focuses on the relationship between the spectator and the actor. It tests the pleasures of their presence within the theatrical convention.” What is the theatrical convention?

A convention is an understanding, an agreement through which we accept our roles in theatre in advance: someone is a spectator, another an actor. One is passive and receives, the other active and transmits.

In Via Negativa a spectator’s passivity transforms into activity…

Conventions, stereotypes and other forms of societal consent through which we enter into preordained relationships are what interests me most as a director. It’s a matrix we live in every day and consider self-evident. It’s a complex system through which we maintain our positions. In theatre, I am interested in borders and the possibilities to overcome them. There is no theatre without a spectator so by being there, they are never really passive. That’s just an illusion, which some artists use to safely deal with themselves. We enjoy the success of moving the border and getting the spectator on stage with us.

I suppose that the presence of spectators means that you don’t know how things will finally unravel…

Of course. We don’t know how they will react. In the moment when the spectator steps on stage, he enters a space he is unfamiliar with. Into a performance only we know. He doesn’t. Anything could happen.

What would happen if a single spectator kept intervening in each performance… would you ban him?

No. When we’re working on a performance, we attempt to predict as many scenarios as possible. Having a single spectator to keep intervening has not yet happened, however in Would Would Not the same spectator collaborated with Katarina Stegnar. This is a scene in which she shows her privates and implies that she will have sexual intercourse with an audience member that showed his. When the same spectator did this for a second night we all began to worry about what was going on. As soon as the visual exchange takes place Katarina leads the spectator “to places unknown” as Blaž Lukan put it. In reality they go for a drink into a nearby bar, where they discuss that all this is only a play, where we count upon the fact that the spectator will accept this. But when he entered the scene for a second night, it seemed as if it was him leading her out. That is when you realize that the play had extended into reality and it sends shivers down your spine as you no longer know whether the play had become reality or reality began to play with you.

Almost all of Via Negativa’s performances were accompanied by scandal. Is this a good way to get sponsors?
Certainly not. Potential sponsors deem the press they would get by sponsoring us negative, even damaging to business. One of Slovenia’s larger companies, having sponsored More, demanded we withdraw their name from all promo material after seeing photos of the show.

The scandals usually arise due to nudity or sexually explicit scenes. A man masturbates for instance or urinating on stage...

The scandals arise when we cross the boundary of the socially acceptable. But our intent is not to cause scandal or shock. It is to show ourselves in a way that makes the audience see us or see what we want to show them.

But considering that other theatres do not do these things, you must anticipate at least some shock...

It would be naïve not to and we approach this expectation strategically. At the beginnings of Via Negativa the question was unimportant. Later, when for example More caused scandals in Germany in regards to us treating food immorally and when magazines began to complain about our undertaking, these responses opened up another dimension to our work. And it did not scare us. In the next project, Incasso (on envy), in which we used money as a prop, we gave a lot of consideration to approaching this theme strategically and making Via Negativa into more than just a strategy of scandal. And even though one would expect an even bigger scandal due to how we handle money in Incasso, this did not happen.

That means we have bigger prejudice when it comes to sexuality than when it comes to money?

I think it is primarily a question of context; a certain action can cause scandal due to the context in which it takes place. When we were preparing Viva Verdi in Zagreb, the opera ensemble of the Zagreb Opera rebelled: that they would not sing Va pensiero from Nabucco, with a naked performer on stage. Later, a great deal was said about the fact we urinated on the stage of the Croatian national theatre.

What do you answer to the questions or doubts of spectators, whether it is really necessary to piss on the national theatre’s stage?

My answer is: yes. In the given context, this seemed like the best way to get people to listen and understand what you are trying to say. The responses in Croatian media confirmed that they understood exactly like we wanted them to and this made us happy.

Do you think we spectators need shock to focus on content better?

We are always looking for actions that would upset the accepted patterns of viewing. I do however understand that shock is not the best means to this end. A shock can close the spectator. If it’s too forceful, the audience turns away.

Like what happened in Zadar with spectators leaving the venue horrified?

In Zadar, Boris Kadin and Kristian Al Droubi repeated Marina Abramović’s performance Rhythm 10. But using the knives on each other. And of course blood was spilled. The knife-game is the finale of the performance on envy, entitled Not like me. We did not want what happened: the shock was so great for the viewers, it occluded the context of
the performance. A lot of the spectators could no longer accept it in the context of what
the performance wants to say. The newspapers only wrote about a Croat and a Serb
cutting each other up on stage. We were quite depressed at the end of the show, even
though we could also probably happy – ha, we did it, we created a scandal.

Why was it necessary to provoke further in the Zadar version of the performers –
by having the national flags of the performers next to them on stage. After all you
are probably aware of the bloody history of the Zadar area.

That is the right question. There came a time when we had to tell ourselves who we are
again. The possibility that a Croat and a Serb take the places of Abel and Cain, killing
each other because of envy, was brought up by the performers themselves. I thought it
was a great displacement; I just wanted to make sure no one knew who was killing
whom anymore. Of course we knew it would also be understood as a political
provocation.

Did you try to serve the audience an interpretation on a plate?

We took a risk. We wanted to open up another layer of reading the performance: that
the envy of which we speak can also be understood politically. And this tore the knife-
game out of the show and spilled over into Croat and Serb newspaper headlines.

All the way to the British Independent?

(laughter) Yes.

Do the performers sometimes find themselves in less agreeable emotional states
after the premieres due to what happened on stage?

I have a feeling we are discussing Would Would Not, the performance on lust.

That too.

It happens, yes. It is often connected with what we wanted to achieve with an action and
what we actually achieved. Even though we consider our strategy carefully, we are not
always successful. After the premiere of Would Would Not we significantly adapted and
focused the strategy we used to let the audience decide on how the performance
unravels. Behind all this is the desire to test borders. Would Would Not is considered the
toughest performance of Via Negativa. Every scene in it demands audience participation.
We never know what we will be able to do and what we won’t or whether we will even
be able to finish the show.

But the audience expects the scenes to finish. For instance, Marko Mandić was
unable to ejaculate on stage, as was I suppose intended. How did this go in
rehearsal?

There was no ejaculation on the night of the premiere, but there were performances
where he did.

What are the factors on which whether something is performed or not depends?

We’re dealing with the uncertainty of performative acts and their repeatability. If an act
only depends on the performer, then the rendition often depends on his or her body.
The border of the body is often the essence of the message of an act; for instance not
being able to do something you want because of your body. Such a scene is performed by Barbara Matijević, who in Viva Verdi promises to fill a glass with her sweat. But even though she spends the entire show dancing to the point of total physical collapse, she usually collects no more than fifty drops of sweat. A completely different example of non-rendition is the scene in Would Would Not in which Kristian Al Droubi asks a spectator to come to the stage and hammer a nail through his penis. We still have a problem with this scene. On one hand we cannot allow this to happen due to repeatability of the performance, but on the other, the spectator who accepts the play feels let down, when the performer does not allow him to do it.

Why do you then form this scene – if you can predict that someone from the audience might be tempted to swing the hammer.

We wanted to know whether a spectator is willing to do this even symbolically. The rendition itself is not that important. The problem is in that we expect the audience to take us for real, and then this reality is not confirmed. I believe the spectator cannot be satisfied with this, which is why neither am I. Sometimes we catch ourselves into a trap when forming scenes and it take a lot of work to unravel it.

What does the fact that an audience member is able to do this tell you as a director? What does it say about this spectator? What makes him different from the others?

Would Would Not brought many surprises. The third time we did it, five guys got naked on stage, as part of a scene by Barbara Matijević, which was completely unimaginable to us during development. People came prepared to see the show. They knew what would happen. They came to act. A completely different audience came to the shows. Tickets were reserved for groups of six people, the people who had seen the show brought back friends to see how far they would go... We opened up the game, the audience came to play with us. It was a great experience for the performance and the performers.

How come there are only younger performers Via Negativa. Would you find older ones be harder to work with?

I wouldn’t but they certainly would. I had an experience in Slovensko Mladinsko Gledališče, where while working on No acting, please! the director Tomi Janežič wanted me to work with the actors in the Via Negativa method for a while. Janežič wanted to test out as many different approaches as possible to creating theatre. I was also very interested in whether it would be possible to work with the ensemble, generally considered very open. I was greatly disappointed. Most of the actors would not accept my methodology, stating it was manipulation on the personal level and had nothing to do with theatre or art. Some said that being an actor does not oblige them to uncover personally, others that such a process would frustrate them too much... Although I was able to establish a creative relationship with some of the SMG ensemble. I encountered similar resentment in Vienna, where I wanted to open a Via Negativa workshop, but during the debate most of the thirty actors almost booed me off, also stating that I wished to manipulate them.

You probably did.

All directing is manipulation! Someone leads the work and sets criteria. That is the work of the director.

What are the mechanisms of manipulation in directing?
Hey! The first manipulative moment takes place when you choose a theme or text and decide how to work then set out to find people to work with and convince them to want to work with you. My way of working, my processes, my aesthetic orientation, my ambition – all these determine the rendition. To some, all this is manipulation, to me it is a creative process that someone has to lead. We are constantly in this relationship. As far as I am concerned, a performer must, even though I invited him into the project, fight for his or her right to be on stage. So in a way, they are trying to manipulate me and must keep trying. The quality of the show we make depends on how far we let ourselves be manipulated by each other. And then there is the performance, which is nothing but a manipulation of the audience, regardless on whether it sits quietly in the dark or whether you keep addressing it from the stage. But I would prefer to say all this manipulation is actually communication.

What will you do in 2009, when the Via Negativa project is over?

I will begin a new cycle of projects, perhaps longer than seven years. Negativa will keep working.