LIV LAVEYNE

Value for your money

What was the reason to make the seven deadly sins the subject of a theatrical search for the past seven years?

Our notion is that anger, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, envy and pride are core aspects of every individual’s identity. Each of these “negative drives” opens up a conflict which is built into the subjective self of each individual: on one hand, one builds mechanisms and strategies of defense from these negative drives to conform to society’s demands; on the other, one develops various forms of release, because one cannot stand the pressure of one’s own subjectivity. Seven deadly sins seemed to be a good subject to open up the “classical theatre” theme about fight between public and private. And we, theatre makers, are in the same position: a stage is a position between private and public. In this way the seven deadly sins’ subject is common ground for all present in the theatre, audience and artists, and we’ve decided to play this theatrical game quite open and basically. At first sight it looks like an old fashion theme but in fact “negativity” is still a main force under surface of contemporary society. Negativity makes main headlines in the news. But in fact, surface is more interesting than what is beneath. I mean, the most interesting are strategies how to conceal the negativity or how to outrun media with public confession. Hiding and revealing of negativity is one of the main games of civilization.

How was your theatre company founded exactly and what is its mission statement? (what sort of theatre – in form and content – you want to bring and what do you hope to achieve towards your public?)

First of all Via Negativa is not a theatre company, it’s a performing arts project – meaning that we are not bound by a set-ensemble logic of a fixed number of constant members. VN is an open type project. We organize annual workshops which offer performers to discover their creative potential in our way of thinking and working and give them a chance to take part in our productions. We consider a theatre performance to be a relationship between a spectator and an actor in real space and time. We deal with this relationship as a complex flow of points of views, expectations, judgments, conclusions, recognitions, stereotypes, prejudices, tolerance or intolerance, knowledge or lack thereof; all these trigger various emotional, rational or irrational responses. We are on stage in order to trigger this relationship, to make it run. Theatre (or performing arts in general) is an artistic medium of communication: each story or situation in front of a spectator is there in order to communicate something, to make a statement, to make a person (spectator) you’re talking to recognize and feel something. That’s why I see theatre, above all, as a sphere of communication, not as a medium of aestheticisation; exchange of points of views before the crafts and skills. We feel we are most real when we touch upon something that can no longer be rationalized, when we no longer have to pretend to understand something we do not. Our aim is simple: to give the audience and ourselves a chance to be alive in this artificial situation.

With ’Via Negativa’ you want to undo theatre of its frills. Do you see to much of that kind of theatre? Is in that way a sort of reactionary theatre? Do you still remember what play you saw that made you think: I want to make something
totally different?

I could say that Via Negativa is an attempt against mystification of the art in general not only theatre. For me to be an artist is a privilege to expose myself, to be personal, to communicate myself, to share my personal opinions, understandings, feelings, anger, fears etc. In this way Via Negativa is definitely a turn backwards, back to the basic sense, meaning and reasons for theatre's existence today. With this turn backwards we are fighting for the right to be on the stage, we are exposing ourselves because that's why we are in front of the people. Theatre gives us a privilege to show what we are forced to hide in our conventional lives, and we've decided not to abuse this privilege. We've stripped theatre of all frills to the level of naked relation with viewer, which we believe is the core of all kinds of performing arts. No more hiding behind the curtains. Via Negativa is not a fight against any existing form of contemporary or traditional artistic practice – it’s fight to make sense (not only money) of art again.

‘Incasso’ had its première in 2004 and is about greed. Has the worldwide economic crisis changed the perception of the performance?

Essentially perception hasn’t changed. But the economic crisis has raised the interest for Incasso performance. This fact confirms that our relation with money is highly personal – this was our starting point while working on performance. Financial crisis reflects that our global economic system is melting as ice on polar caps but it does not change our relation to money, on the contrary, it intensifies it.

Is there a central storyline, or do you keep far away from storytelling theatre? It’s about the complex relationship between people and money. Can you briefly explain the complexity and how it shows on stage?

Not only theatre, whole art is about storytelling. For me a story (a myth) is the beginning of everything. In this case I’m really conservative. For me each painting or music is a story, or there’s a story behind it and I’m the one who must read it, recognize it in the art piece – otherwise the art doesn’t work. In contemporary society we have professional art “readers” (critiques, theorists, art historians etc). Nowadays the audience depends on their reading, audience needs their “brief” in order to consume the art work; on the other side artists “use” these professional art readers as translators, mediators, moderators... In this sense we’re trying to make a shortcut: what we do is what you see, there’s nothing behind to understand, there’s no deeper meaning, there’s no need to learn about the history of contemporary performing arts to understand what we’re talking about.

Yes, Incasso is about complex relationship between people and money. The power, the totalitarianity of money is what makes everything unbearably simple. Money is means by which we exchange values, with money we define the values of practically everything in order to be able to trade with everything. Things get complicated when we confuse the value with the meaning or sense or importance of things. And we do it constantly. The same is with art. We're forced to fight for our meaning (importance) through the market value. This is the game we must accept or there's no place for us in contemporary times. In theatre there’s always money between us also. The most obvious moment is a ticket a person must buy. We trade something in advance; the audience is ready to pay for a kind of promise, a possibility, a chance that this might be an artistic or at least an entertaining event. In this way a performance is pure economic relationship of exchanging the values. In Incasso (some may not know, incasso is Italian expression for box office money) we disclose this symbolic relation: we openly put money between us in order to take away this symbolic mandate from it, to degrade it to the level of a stage prop and to create “art
pieces” from it.

‘Incasso’ also reflect on the way artists in Eastern Europe deal with the changes after communism and in a ‘free’ world that is ruled by the power of money. How has that changed reality personally/artistically affected you?

At first as deliverance, a sensation of freedom with the liberating feeling that suddenly all doors are open, although Slovenia was never a hard boiled communist country. But it was not the change of economical system or brutality of capital or liberalization of our political system that quickly made us sober – what stroked us the most was the loss of the idea and that’s what we are still fighting with. This was the biggest and unexpected change: we lost big ideas about brotherhood and unity between Yugoslavian nations, we lost the idea of socialism – we’ve been trained to believe in big Ideas or to fight against them. Suddenly there was nothing to fight for or against. I hope you remember the movie Deliverance directed by John Boorman. It’s really a great metaphor for Freedom, and this is what Freedom is doing to us -delivered nations, delivered individuals – right now.

What are the reactions of the public? Is there a a big difference between the countries where you perform? They can pay as much or as less as they want to see the performance. Has the crisis made people more greedy?

Of course there are differences. Because of our straightforward attitude the audience in the Western Europe can be really suspicious and distrustful at the beginning; it’s trying to discover what’s hidden behind all we’re doing, maybe expects some ugly manipulation or something similar, while the Balkan audience enjoys this attitude and usually immediately grabs the opportunity not to be formal. I’ve noticed that money is more a pride issue than a greed problem, because of the displacement of values I’ve mentioned before. We all are aware that our relation to money can quickly disclose what kind of persons we are. Generally people do not want to risk this disclosure in the open relation we are offering – to fix their own price for the performance they came to see. Usually they pay around average price for the ticket they’re used to pay. Crisis makes people passive; they know that this is not their game. It is a big lecture about greed of the system, people; I’m angry knowing that we will all pay for it, but not to get rid of it, no, to save it, to preserve it. It’s definitely a greed story.

Can you give some examples of reactions from the public that really amazed you in either a good or a bad way?

My standpoint is that public reacts according to a deal you’re offering. There’s always a kind of an agreement or a silent contract in the theatre. If sometimes I was disappointed about audiences’ reaction then I was disappointed about myself, because I recognized that what we were offering was not interesting or good enough for them to accept it. I never underestimate the audience. We’ve learned that people are ready for things beyond our imagination if you find a way to approach them. While we were working on performance OUT (2008) we decided that the audience should be the one who stopped the performance (not us) and that we would stay on the stage until they left the theatre. It was the performance about pride, the last of the 7 deadly sins series. So we decided to play “fetch and bring” dog game with the audience: performers were on their knees, half of them naked, barking and throwing the ball to the audience, going wild if somebody hesitated not to throw it back on the stage. We expected that audience would be amused at the beginning but also bored quite quickly with this game, and that they would stop after some time. But even if they were bored they threw the ball back to us, because that was the rule. Nobody wanted to stop. We’ve made lots of different changes in the
performance in order to give the audience good reasons to stop it and leave the theatre, but after 10 performances it was clear that we had to change the rule: in the middle of this dog play one performer asked the audience not to throw the ball anymore, while dogs were going mad asking for the ball. After we gave the audience a clear chance to decide, the game started to be fight we were looking for.

**After seven years of ‘Via Negativa’, you’re now working on ‘Via Nova’. What is it about?**

After seven years of researching the relations between a viewer and a performer we've returned back to the beginning to use materials from this period and to work on them all over again in order to find new ways to do it. We're moving from questions of ethics of creation towards questions of aesthetics of creation. That's why we call this project Via Nova.

(Interview was published in abridged version.)