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Via Negativa – Experimental Performance

At the end of February, you can view a reprise of three of the five VIA NEGATIVA performances at Glej Theatre and Stara Elektrarna. These are works that have already been seen on Slovenian stages. Incasso premiered in 2004, Bi Ne Bi (Would Would Not) in 2005, and Viva Verdi in 2006. The rotating cast is made up of latecomers to the theatre and those so ignorant that they have never even seen the piece being performed. Because of the open structure of the staging, the interaction with the audience, and the changing cast, each performance of the work is entirely unique.

VIA NEGATIVA is a seven-year theatrical project. It is an international theatre group which does not function according to the principles of a static fixed cast but instead has a rotating cast comprised of actors from Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Ireland, and Spain. The goal is for the number of VIA NEGATIVA performers to increase through open workshops organized on an ongoing basis. The group has a number of extraordinary performers, radical artists that exist outside of mainstream institutions, and non-professionals. This kind of theatrical collective confirms the claim “that there are actors that act a lot, actors that act well, and actors that love what they’re doing.” In terms of Slovenian theatrical artists, we should mention a few elite, research-oriented performance artists: Katarina Stegnar, Gregor Zorc, Petra Govc, Marko Mandič and Barbara Kukovec.

The basic question of this experimental theatrical project led and directed by Bojan Jablanovec is how to be truthful in front of an audience? All of the elements of theatrical illusion are eliminated; there are no costumes, no set, and no script. Theatrical conventions are further undermined by elements of performance, namely that the actor is both author and material.

This long-term project is based on the research of the human characteristics that are known as the seven deadly sins and were written about in the Christian apologia: wrath, avarice, greed, gluttony, lust, sloth, envy, and pride. The focus is not the moral or ethical aspect of these human qualities but rather their universality in human nature. “Via Negativa!” was the rallying cry of neo-avant-garde theatre and was considered the motto of stage artists in that space and time. If we compare the orientation of the neo-avant-garde to this historical avant-garde, it is worth noting that the new version has renounced any efforts at direct advancement of revolutionary social goals. The reason is not political cynicism, as explored by Hans-Thies Lehmann, but rather changing evaluations of the possibility of it actually working.

VIA NEGATIVA strives to break through rational mental processes with the intent of pursuing an image of the unconscious. This type of guidance or communication in the theatre takes place on an idiosyncratic and personal level – each unconscious mind has a discourse that is all its own. Therefore, consequential and genuine communication, more than understanding, is grounded in impulses of personal creativity reception. When the futurists, Dadaists, and surrealists devised the foundations of artistic action, they were inclined toward the radical re-evaluation of civilizational values and the revolutionizing of all life conditions. Today such artistic action no longer has at its centre social provocation and the demand for the immediate change of the world. Engagement takes place above all in the preparation of events, exceptions, instances of deviation which, in
an era of conformism of the senses and media-filtered perceptions, is not only important but refreshing.

In the phenomenon of historical avant-garde theatre, provocative actions have used conflict with the public as their central element. This tradition is carried on in new theatre and has the potential to change the concept of theatrical communication itself. The new theatre, which has emerged in the last several decades, diverges from political forms that dominated the experimental theatre scene during the period from the historical avant-garde up to the 1960s. Theatrical communication has ceased to be treated above all as a confrontation with the public but more as the creation of situations in which participants question themselves and their previous experiences.

Happenings and performances are theatrical phenomena that were enthusiastically embraced by the avant-garde. They focused on physical, affective, spatial relations between actors and the audience, and researched the possibility of cooperation and interaction. At the heart of this research was presence, real events rather than representation, mimesis in fiction. In this kind of theatre, the end result or the product is less important than the process itself or the functioning of creative forces.

And why focus on the performance pieces of the theatrical group VIA NEGATIVA? Because the group strives in its work for real experience, experience that transcends representation. Its works have the direct intention of experimenting with the real in terms of space, time, and the body.

These performances have undoubtedly produced hitherto-unknown moments of life experience and radically altered thinking about art. At the centre is the direct experience of the artists and the auditorium. Performers manipulate and play with duration, fluidity, simultaneousness which cannot be repeated. The task of the audience is not mental reconstruction, renewed creation, and the patient description of fixed images, but instead the mobilization of their own capacity for response and empathy. The actors themselves are not conceived of as interpreters of roles but as performers that project their own presence through reflection and contemplation.

The work and research of VIA NEGATIVA creates vitality, the provocative presence of the subject that, instead of being embodied in images, engages with the production of presence, using the intensity of face-to-face communication. This is most directly expressed in the work Bi ne Bi (Would Would Not), when lewd desire is put on stage in front of the audience and then removed a safe distance from the rows of unmoving observers. It is precisely in such moments that we observe the free-thinking impulse of the performative decisions that do not adhere to some previous valid criteria but instead to the effectiveness of communication. In this way, theatre moves away from previous norms of staging in which the product is conceived of as reified product and instead approaches elements of communication and exchanges that are not determined by the hierarchy of the theatrical situation.

The new theatre artist does not so much perform as organize and construct actions that claim his or her body. This artist summons an instant that is real, emotionally convincing, and is happening here and now. In this way, he or she acquires a productive presence that is neither representation nor mimesis. It is the presence of the subject that strives to be different from the presence of sound, images, architecture and therefore can never be here and fulfilled in the broadest sense. It always maintains the sense of the visible, the revealed which can also disappear and enter into contemplative experience.

VIA NEGATIVA’s two reprised pieces, Incasso and Bi ne bi are structured as a series of
scenes. Each individual performer chooses, based on the specific theme, a situation and a memory, writes a text, and adds physical movement. It is a sort of psychoanalytical physical self-reflection on the stage. All texts are actually written by the performers and everything they say somehow connects to their own secret personal history.

VIA NEGATIVA practices what is an almost aggressive verbal and physical form of artistic attack on the audience. The attack is not physically direct but is directed toward fixed perceptions and the automatism of the senses. The actions the performers physically carry out are brutally rationalized, instrumentalized, and demand control, will, the presence of intelligence, and the desire to provoke extreme reactions.

VIA NEGATIVA, as a group, excels in running, jumping, revealing, and delighting in naked bodies. The body is the method with which performers direct and alert the flow of secret meanings, the emergence of associations, the imaginative adventures of the audience. Despite the occasional banal moment or claim, each VIA NEGATIVA text, as action, possesses precisely reflected material. Some events take place on an entirely conscious and trivial level, some on a vulgar level, but these are only shortcuts to the fundamental root pattern of the political and social mentality of our times. The politics of the theatre is nothing other than the politics of perception.

Viva Verdi is a performance piece that moves away from the spatial intimacy of the solo numbers that dominate in Incasso and the provocation of personal intimacy in Bi Ne Bi. Instead it tackles the magnificence of sloth. Sloth or the desire for lasting peace, inertia, and inactivity is also the stubborn persistence of comfort and safe refuge in one’s own mentality. Viva Verdi graphically creates a situation on stage that places actors and opera singers in opposition. Namely, the actors initiate actions that are considered disgusting, improper, and inadmissible by prevailing social forces: from urinating to an experiment of how to make a fountain out of a flask of urine, roughhousing, nudity, vomiting, filling one’s mouth with soil, etc. These actions are frequently interrupted by the entrances of dignified opera singers who are contemptuous of these activities. With the gracious and educated range of their voices and their physical images whose massive size finds its roots in the elegance of the salon, the singers project the antipode to chaos and the deformation of good manners. They are trapped in the perfect representation of their own theatrical mission and as such are absent. Though untouchable and filled with pride, they are, in terms of real life, unreachable and omnipotent.

While these singers from the socially established cultural institution of opera use all their power to preserve their total control and fascinate with their performance, the eyes of the voyeur take in the events on stage with irritation and disapproval. The unease with the singers is anchored in their physical appearance and posture. Yet they undoubtedly perform extraordinary work as does the musical ear and precise comprehensiveness of the director Bojan Jablanovec, the driving force behind VIA NEGATIVA.

All three pieces, Incasso, Bi Ne Bi and Viva Verdi, engage with the existing canon of the permissible: what can and cannot be done on stage. What is forbidden by a rational and civilized person what is allowed? These stage events are not merely pretentious improvisations but are thoughtfully conceived and free of connotations. If this were not the case, they could be seen as excessive, banal, primitive, and tasteless. The radical interventions into the territory of the physical are premeditated and serve as a material device that catapults the subject into a psycho-physical condition, into emotions that must be genuine because of the extreme pressures placed on the body. Such interventions include the cutting of fingertips and the smearing of banknotes with
blood, the grotesque declaration of prenuptial promises made with a mouth filled with money, the illustration of the sarcastic statement "what matters is the principle" by urinating on bank notes.

While this experiment successfully shattered the hierarchies of theatrical method and the accepted divisions of artistic genres and the cooperation between the performers was fruitful, we should also note the death of illusion that for a long time has been immanent to the theatre. With VIA NEGATIVA, we must recognize that there is no longer a fictional space of communication that unfolds on the stage. What is intensified is the axis of the theatron, the communicative tunnel between the stage and the auditorium, which now directly addresses and recognizes, revives and thrusts.

In a period of luxurious simulation of reality, the almost unavoidable interfaces of communication – from mobile phones, television, and the internet – are the antipode of direct communication on the stage which is here and now. The body contains the irreducible surplus, the imperfect vitality that unMASKs the voyeur who, helplessly fascinated, strains his eyes and ears. Perhaps it is a fascination with the effects, though not of the kind we might call the wakeful vitality of the subject. It is human and uncontrollable imperfection – charisma – that the subject reveals itself as unique in a mechanized and automated reality.

And why does theatre need a phenomenon like VIA NEGATIVA?

The experimental impulse that has already taken root in many other artistic practices has now caught up with the theatre. For a long time the theatre had been a relatively expensive aesthetic practice that survived on financial contributions determined by the number of theatregoers who attend performances. For this reason, established cultural institutions have not been able to take advantage of the forces that support and initiate experimental processes and that are essential to the development of theatrical expression, pushing the limits of reflection, comprehension, and perception.

Experimental theatre has often been neglected because innovative work is not always acceptable to a wider audience and the creative process sometimes needs many years to develop new ideas. And yet experimental theatre is all the more valuable in an era not favourable towards idiosyncratic art forms, in other words in times when disengagement, disinterest, and general apathy prevail in the wider culture.

If Tadeusz Kantor managed to create his theatrical canon during World War II, during the time of the German occupation when Poland was under Nazi rule, a time when plays had to be staged in private, carefully guarded apartments because the discovery of artistic activity could be punished by death – then surely we can find a niche where art with a capital A can be created in our space and time.