

The Spectator's Performing Body: the Case of the *Via Negativa* Theatre Project

The concept of the performing body consists of two elements: the performer's and the spectator's performing bodies. The performer's body is an active and creative body on stage, while the spectator's body is considered an uncreative body, passive in his or her seat. In this article, findings regarding the duality of the performing body, its interchangeability, and its intertwinement, derive from researching *Via Negativa*, a Slovenian-based (yet international in its nature) theatrical project established almost a decade ago by theatre director Bojan Jablanovec. The mission of *Via Negativa* is to investigate the relationship between the performer and the spectator exclusively through theatrical means. Tomaž Krpič is a sociologist of the body with particular interest in postmodern theatre and performance. He was until recently Lecturer in Cultural Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana University, Slovenia.

*'Theatre is an art of body and art grounded in body.'*¹

*'We therefore need a different theatre, a theatre without spectators: not a theatre played out in front of empty seats, but a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is subjected to a different relationship – that implied by another word, one which refers to what is produced on the stage: drama. Drama means action. Theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized.'*²

THE BODY is an essential element in the process of establishing intersubjectivity in any social relationship,³ not solely with regards to the theatre.⁴ Although, like any other social and cultural phenomena, the theatre is composed of various elements which generally help to reduce the uncertainty of communication between actors and theatregoers, the main aim of modern theatre is not to attain public consensus. Often the theatre production aims at disquiet. It is not necessary that the outcome of such an intention is a dissatisfied audience, though this could be the case. The point is not that the spectator likes the performance, yet it certainly should touch the spectator.⁵

Of all the elements of the theatre, the body seems to be of greatest importance. A relation among subjects in a close culturally and socially defined space such as the theatre is always a relation of flesh and blood. But whose body do we have in mind when we picture the body in the theatre? In her editorial for the special issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review* on 'Theatrical Bodies and Everyday Life', Catherine Graham defines the theatrical body, using a quotation from Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's work, as an 'enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs'.⁶ Unfortunately, by this statement, she means solely the body of the performer, leaving out the body of the spectator altogether. Such an understanding of the performing body should not surprise us, for until recently the most obvious and expected answer to the question above would have been that the performing body is the body of the performer.

There are at least two different corporeal entities presented in the theatre at all times: a group of performing actors and a group of people that constitute a live audience. The question that arises is this: should we take into consideration at least two different theatrical bodies instead of only one, i.e. the body of the performer and the body of the

spectator? The reason why in the past we were prone to imagine a single, uniform performing body – namely the performer's performing body – is perhaps trivial: the body of the performer is active and creative, carrying out roles on the stage under the spotlight, while the body of the spectator is placed quietly in the dark, contemplating intellectually and/or emotionally a commotion on the stage. The convention that regulates the relations between those two bodies is thus not exactly equivalent or symmetrical. At least one body, and this would be the body of the spectator, is in a subordinate position.

The Performer's Care for the Spectator

During the last decade, a great many theatres have contested the traditional and mostly anticipated relation between the performer and the spectator. Among them is *Via Negativa*, a Slovenian-based but international in character theatre project that has created a history of theatrical events for nearly ten years now. The founder of the *Via Negativa* theatre project is Slovenian theatre director Bojan Jablanovec. According to one of his responses given during an interview conducted for the leading Slovenian journal of theatre and performance, *Maska*, he claimed to see theatre, 'above all, as a sphere of communication, not as a medium of aestheticism'.⁷

His aim is thus not to develop a new theatre in terms of an innovative stylistic paradigm, though his statement includes much more than just a denunciation of the artistic quest for aestheticism – i.e. the renunciation of aesthetic judgement on the beauty or ugliness of the artwork. In fact, it is a sort of restitution of the original meaning of the word 'aesthetic' as one's perceived relation to things and others through the senses. The concept of communication is the key to a new understanding of the performing body, for it forces us to understand the performance as interpersonal contact, a consultation with one's audience, and a discussion or social intercourse. To communicate is to build something that we all have in common

with each other. From there, Jablanovec is after a shift from aesthetic to ethic.

Inspired by the idea of negative theology and the poor theatre of Jerzy Grotowski, the primary aim of Jablanovec is to reduce the theatre merely to a relationship between the performer and the spectator in real space and time. The expression used as a name for the project, *Via Negativa*, is also borrowed from Grotowski, with the intention to emphasize the importance of negative theology, i.e. the principle according to which one is well aware of what one does not want, but does not necessarily know what one really wants.

Although Jablanovec admits that, at first, Grotowski's ideas are an important source, a starting point for the project *Via Negativa*, he stresses in several interviews that his intention is not to develop his own version of the poor theatre. First, it is not the collection of the artist's skills that matters; more important is one's eradication of the blocks that prevent one from successfully acting on the stage. Second, contradiction is a technique that illuminates the hidden structure of signs. And third, it is above all important that the performer on the stage acts upon his or her own reason and does not channel someone else's messages.

Like Grotowski,⁸ Jablanovec's intention is to direct the performer to intense and perpetual self-reflexivity and self-judgement. The performer's consciousness should, during the performance or training, move away from orthodox notions of being and move towards ontology wherein the execution of a technically exacting mind-body activity becomes a performer's *modus operandi*. However, irrespective of Jablanovec's will to escape Grotowskian influence – in which, if the comparison between both theatres takes place on the level of the aesthetic of their artwork, Jablanovec is undoubtedly successful – Grotowski's ideas nonetheless remain immensely significant to his work on the 'epistemological' and 'methodological' level.

Theatres, claims Jablanovec, take the audience for granted, and as a consequence, the positive role of the spectator is usually neglected or, at the very least, underestimated. The spectator is culturally oppressed



In *Four Deaths* (2007) performers compete for the 'love' of the audience, setting up phantoms of the death of four great names in the European performing arts world. Here, Katarina Stegnar as Pina Bausch establishes close contact with the audience.

instead of being liberated. It was explained earlier that the goal of *Via Negativa* is to address and motivate the spectators to evolve and elevate into more liberated, active, and self-reflexive spectators.

The method of reduction used by *Via Negativa* contains one particular methodological element that I call the pseudo-spectator. Jablanovec's decision to include the pseudo-spectator as an element of theatrical methodology is rather plain, yet logical and effective. During rehearsals, performers are not allowed to interpret or make any explanatory comments about their work on the stage.

The performers' ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions have to be presented exclusively as performing acts and nothing more. The responsibility is upon those others who watch them to interpret and make evaluations of the individuals' works of art. The other members of the team, those who most likely will not take any part in the final production, act during the rehearsals as if they are the spectators. The theatre director and the rest of the crew are thus a kind of artificial substitute for the live audience.

Seven Performances of *Seven Deadly Sins*

The project *Via Negativa* started as a series of seven theatre performances over seven years entitled *Seven Deadly Sins*. Every performance was dedicated to one particular deadly sin: *Starting Point Anger* (wrath), *More* (gluttony), *Incasso* (greed), *Would Would Not* (lust), *Viva Verdi* (sloth), *Four Deaths* (envy), and *Out* (pride). Perhaps Jablanovec's decision to refer to these traditional themes is the most evident attempt to intensify the certainty of a successful construction of sensual bodily relations between the performer and the spectator during the performance.

The negative ethic of the seven deadly sins is very well known to everyone. An individual reconciles the seven-sins ethic in order to act socially in accordance with norms and rules of modern Western society. Knowledge of the seven deadly sins thus works as a unified platform of common knowledge.⁹ On top of that, the religious theme goes hand in hand with 'Grotowskian' characters in the *Via Negativa* project. The series *Seven Deadly Sins* ended in 2008. After the initial project finished, the group produced several new

performances, all deriving from the initial project, called *Via Nova: Erasing the Audience, Tonight I Celebrate, No One Should Have Seen This, What Joseph Beuys Told Me, All That You Come For, Viva Mandi, Game With Toothpicks, Interview with an Artist, Spotlight on Me, Good Deal, Buyer With an Eye, Pure Performance, Invalid, Still Life, Guilty, and Drop Dead.*

One characteristic of the first seven performances was that they were collective. Although every actor performed his or her own individual piece – a ‘solo’ performance, so to speak – the theme of the performance functioned as a common canopy for everyone involved. Later, when the group *Via Negativa* started the new sequence of performing the *Via Nova*, the performances transformed into solo works. Each performance was presented through a performer’s honest public confession, where one’s true self was exposed.¹⁰

It is by coming to know the mystery of another, says Grotowski,¹¹ that one comes to know one’s own, and vice versa. Grotowski sincerely believed that discussion in the form of analyses and evaluation of others’ work is essential for improvement of the theatre. Only in this way can one become familiar with the mystery of another and simultaneously get to know one’s own mystery. The idea of confession in the production of *Via Negativa* refers neither to Christianity nor to the clinical practice of making a distinction between the normal and the pathological, but to the disclosure of basic truth about theatre. It is more a method by which the performer addresses the spectators from the stage in order to gain a reaction from the audience.

There are various forms of theatrical production in terms of material requisites, i.e. scenography, yet *Via Negativa* is a theatre of plain scenography. The stage is more a platform, perhaps equipped with a chair or when necessary a table or any other indispensable requisite. The style is minimalistic. The performers are usually dressed in simple and quotidian clothes; frequently they undress during the performance and stand naked in front of the spectators, although this is not at all a requirement. Music or any sound from

backstage is not necessarily present, as Jablanovec permits its use only if the performer can persuade him that it is absolutely necessary.

The performer stands in front of the spectators, who often number several dozen but sometimes fewer than ten. The distance between the performer and the spectator is very small, sometimes almost intimate. It is little wonder that as a consequence of this type of theatre one discernible object must be at the forefront: the unique presence of the performer’s performing body. Ascertaining the performing body is in some way redundant, for the performing body is, after all, one of the constitutive elements of the theatre and always has to be present. So it cannot really ‘disappear’ to be discovered some time later. It can only, through the use of various theatrical techniques, be ‘disclosed’ to the spectator’s gaze. Thus, Jablanovec merely paraphrases an old phenomenological idea that the body is an exceptional object, for one can control it in action and attribute a sensory field in accordance with the performer’s experience.

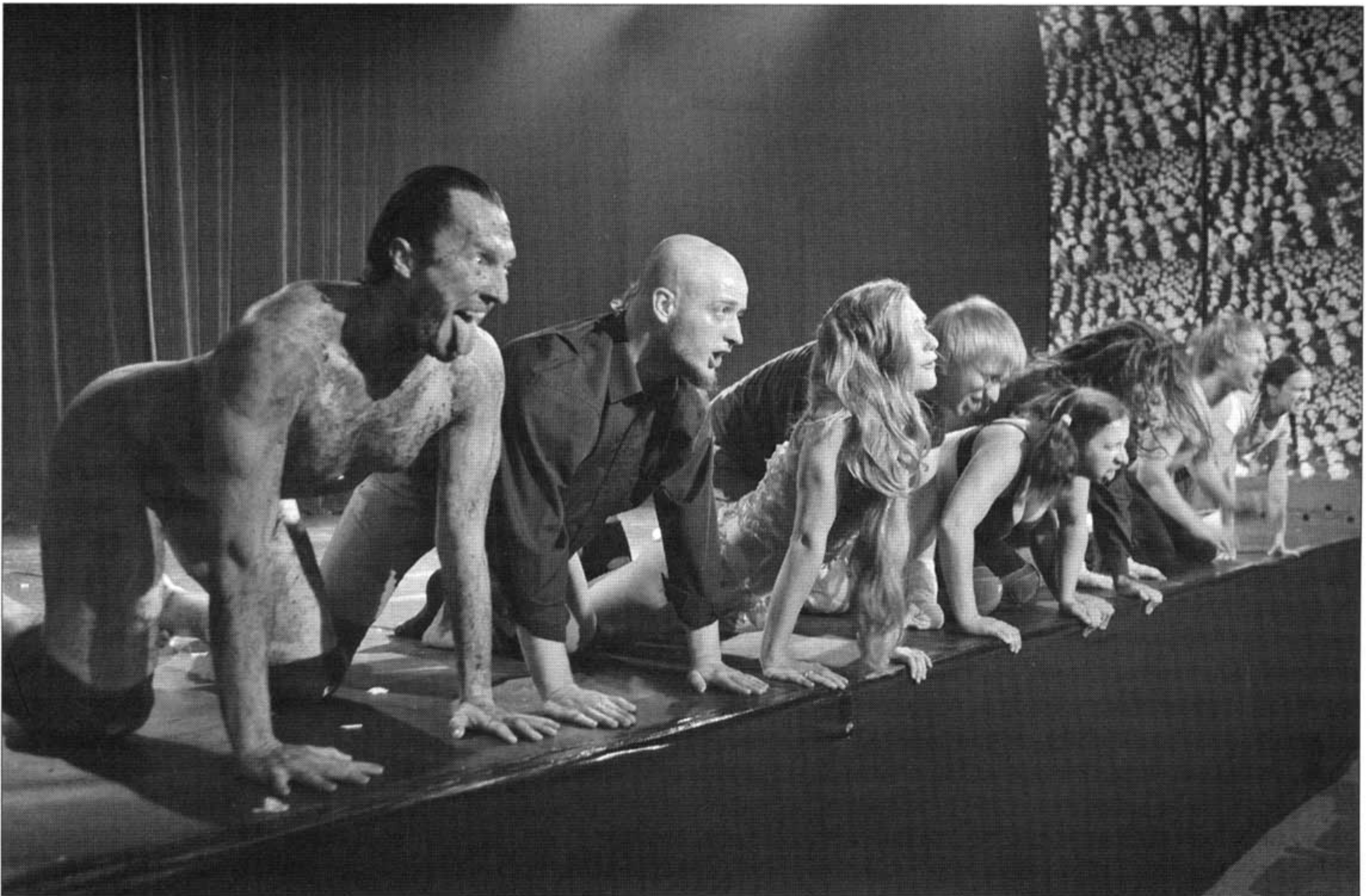
Slovenian art critic and art theoretician Blaž Lukan correctly points to the fact that the method of Grotowskian reduction applied in Jablanovec’s performances redirects the spectator’s attention to the individual’s bodily level. Although he does not use the term ‘the body-home’, he nevertheless refers to a similar, yet reduced, notion when he speaks about ‘the body as *oikos*, as (the only) home, a refuge, a cavity or an aperture where life is “at home”.’¹²

I introduced the concept of the body-home when analyzing the case of Slovenian body-art performer Ive Tabar.¹³ I define body-home as a performer’s reduction to particular embodiment that enables artistic agency within a particular community and the purpose of which is to reach a desirable performance of an individual existence. Especially in terms of performing a confession, the performing performer’s body in the case of *Via Negativa* is the body-home. The performer experiences his/her own body as a central point in the world, a referential point from which the entire world is evaluated and acted upon.



Above: *More* (2003), in which the audience chooses displayed foodstuffs in order to integrate the scenes. Each scene is a personal statement in which the performers reveal their gluttony or their fight against it.

Below: *Out* (2008), in which ten performers get down on their knees and start playing 'throw and fetch', a game of doggish devotion, with the audience. The game goes on as long as the audience is willing to play it.



The individual experiences his or her own bodily behaviour on two different yet interconnected, levels: first, as movements in the outer world, observable to the spectator; and, second, as movements referring to one's own stream of consciousness, a relation that is directly observable only to the performer. During the long preparation for the performance, the performer's act originates from his or her own experiences or relations to the world. In this way, every performer who collaborates in any of the *Via Negativa* performances has to submerge into his or her own thoughts in order to find a proper subject for the performance.

Grega Zorc's performance *All That You Come For*, for instance, is an example of a performer's struggle for balance between private and public, as he performs from his personal tragedy. The performer's relation to his or her own body is also partially defined by the (silent) broad cultural frame in which the performer lives and works. Primož Bezjak, one of the performers of *Via Negativa*, speaks about his own body as a tool, an instrument¹⁴ that enables him to perform virtuosic on the stage, even if his body is inflicting on him severe pain. At first sight, his attitude towards his own body is purely instrumental. Nevertheless, as he understands his own body as a source of pain, his body is not simply an entity in his possession. He is also his own body; otherwise, he would not be able to feel his own pain.

The Spectator's Performing Body

One characteristic that makes theatre unique is its collectivity, giving the term its broadest meaning. It demands a certain quality of presence and each other's perception from both partners: the performer and the spectator. In some sense, it demands a 'community'. Unfortunately there are only a few examples of analyses of theatre from sociological or anthropological perspectives. Exceptions are the works of Maria Shevtsova¹⁵ and Piergiorgio Giacchè.¹⁶ While the first focuses on wider social, cultural, and political contexts in which performers and theatre directors work in the modern world, the

latter centres on the autonomy of the theatre as a distinctive social, cultural, and political phenomenon of the present day.

Grotowski defines the theatre as a complement to social reality, although not at all a hermetically separated realm. For him,¹⁷ the theatre is more a way of showing the path to the liberation of society by liberating the theatre first. I am not saying that the aim of the theatre project *Via Negativa* is to raise a community or a collective consciousness in the traditional manner of speaking. Some of the spectators are friends or acquaintances of the performers; some are professionally interested in the work; many are cultured theatre-goers; some are just casual visitors.

However, Jablanovec's claim of establishing communication and close contact between performers and spectators during the performance sometimes creates a sort of collective effervescence. The spectators present at the *Via Negativa* performances express great and open curiosity towards what is happening on the stage. Although they are not necessarily invited as 'equal' partners to join the performers on the stage (as in the performance *Would Would Not*), they feel that their own presence is much desired, as the performer is physically oriented towards them and accosts them directly.

Piergiorgio Giacchè defines the spectator as 'the social performer who can enjoy the luxury of distancing himself from society so that he becomes the judge and in some cases the master of the spectacle that is the world'.¹⁸ Nowadays the spectator is a rare species. In the past spectators were socialized into a massive audience, but in today's society flooded with highly developed communication techniques, the spectator becomes incorporeal and replaced by mass media. However, the theatre is an exceptional art phenomenon, where the spectator still needs to be bodily present.

By all means, the performing body is an observable item. This is its essential characteristic, making the performing body theatrical and at the same time social and political. It is evident from the *Via Negativa* theatrical experiment that the bodies in the theatre are in constant sensual interaction



Above: *Would Would Not* (2005) can be sustained only with the active collaboration of the audience, depending on their readiness to participate in the scenes onstage and accept responsibility for the course of the action.

Below: *Starting Point: Anger* (2002), in which performers present themselves as gallery exhibits, and each gives a fifteen-minute statement on the personal source of their anger.



with each other. The performing body is seen, heard, smelled, touched, and even tasted, yet at the same time the performing body is able to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. The other's performing body is observable as a symptom of the other's thoughts, emotions, and feelings, and as such it constructs a unified field of expression. The theatre is about a close spatial and synchronic temporal relationship between two types of performing bodies: the performers' performing body and the spectators' performing body. In the theatre of *Via Negativa* both are observed immediately and directly.

Holding a Dynamic Balance

Although Judith Koltai's interpretation of performance is in many ways similar to other interpretations, there is one element in her understanding that still makes a difference. The performer who, says Koltai, has an internal need to be seen and witnessed is at the same time in a position to be a responsive witness to others. By 'others', Koltai means the spectators – not explicitly, but nevertheless, in some sense, she ascribes the same position and bodily behaviour of the performer to the spectator. Even more, she believes that 'those who see and hear and those who are seen and heard together hold the dynamic balance of the collective experience, which includes and affects them all'.¹⁹ Koltai's understanding of the relationship between the performer and the spectator is thus at once less radically altered and more balanced than Giacchè's. The performer is still a performer and the same goes for the spectator. But their roles in the theatre, though not interchangeable, are equivalent. Their performing bodies are hierarchically on the same level.

Embodied perception of the performing body occurs in two ways. First, the performing body actively constitutes the qualities of the thing and others' bodies. Second, the performing body provides an individual with kinaesthetic sensations as a base for its own physical behaviour. At first, the performer's bodily behaviour is given to the spectator as visual phenomena and vice

versa without any analogy to kinaesthetic sensations; however, gradually the visual information can change into that which is haptic and closely related to the spectator's memory. One of the spectators reported that, during a performance of *Invalid*, after a while sensations reappeared in her mind similar to those she had had during treatment after she was injured as a ballet dancer.

The importance of perception is clearly evident in the work of *Via Negativa*. At one point, Jablanovec changed from accepting the process of perception as a transaction of signs/language between the performer and the spectator towards recognition of perception as opening a channel of vision.²⁰ The process of communication between the performer and the spectator during the *Via Negativa* performances takes place on the level of perception of Schafer's fantasy negotiation involving constant dissatisfaction.²¹ But from where does this gap between a spectator's fantasy and real theatre originate? The question is whether the performers of *Via Negativa* – by addressing, sometimes even inviting, the spectator to take a part in the performance – exceed the theatrical hierarchy mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The performances of *Via Negativa* are precisely prepared in advance, which means that the director and the performers attempt to predict what would be the effect on the spectators of their actions on the stage. As little as possible is left to improvisation. Primož Bezjak, who, in his latest production of *Via Negativa*, *The Invalid*, expected the spectator to be able to recognize the intention of the performer's gesture to constitute in the spectator's imagination the missing hand or leg of the 'disabled' performer. The performing body of the spectator is an indicator of the performer's inwardness, but despite the temporal belonging of the spectator's body to the performer's world, the spectator's world and so also the spectator's performing body nevertheless remain 'strange' to the performer.

On the other hand, the spectator might develop the feeling that the performer's world and the world of the spectator during

the process of establishing empathy in the performance dissolve into each other. In the case of the theatre project *Via Negativa*, it is the performer who does not want to destroy the theatrical hierarchy between the performer's performing body and the spectator's performing body.

Erika Fischer-Lichte uses the expression 'autopoietic feedback loop' to express spectators' actual cognitive, emotional, or even bodily intervention in the performer's bodily agency on the stage.²² In the *Via Negativa* performance *Would Would Not*, one of the performers, Katarina Stegnar, at the beginning of the performance, made a promise to have sex with a male spectator if he would dare to show his erection in public, though she actually did not mean to fulfil her obligation. The spectator's performing body was 'invited' to make an intervention with the performer's performing body by changing his own status in the performing body. Much to her surprise, one male spectator decided to take the chance. However, he was not compensated. For Grotowski, the theatrical catharsis can be achieved only as an authentic relationship between the performer and the spectator in a community of 'believers'.²³ Obviously, the spectator was the true believer, not the performer.

Notes and References

The author would like to express gratitude to the theatre group *Via Negativa* for help during the research. The author is also indebted to spectators, who were willing to share with him their thoughts and feelings about *Via Negativa*.

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