

Via Negativa on Desiré Festival
Magyar Narancs, 19. December 2013

ARTNER SISSO

No country for Slovenes

The so-called guest in honor of the special festival, organized by Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre from Subotica – which hosts theater laboratories from post-Yugoslavia and Hungary – was the world-famous Slovenian formation Via Negativa, which appeared on Theater in Szeged, too.

These “bad asses” of the post-Yugo scene dare to say out loud what we are just thinking about; they ask provocative questions about the relationship between the spectator and the theater, the stage and the reality. They are daring, though not boring, attractive, but better beware of them. It's bit like a quarrel in between the superior self and the subconscious, and yet the former gets to win. Then it sticks out its' tongue. Besides conducting art-sociological and behavior-psychological researches on the viewers, they weave actual-critical discourse into their theatre – which is typical of the Slovenian scene, in general. They are intelligent

theatre-punks

who take notes while provoking. The tools they use for their “spectator-experiments” are classical, story-telling performance like: the raw physicality, the nudity, the sexuality, and the exposition of body fluids. *The blood is red. The blood is warm. The blood is beautiful* – as Kornél Esti would say, while handling over the knife to us. Of course they do not cause physical harm to anyone, if so then it's only themselves who they put in danger. However, sensitives and the mentally unstable better don't sit in the first row, unless there is only one row to sit, e.g. a circle. In such a case they could still decide whether to enter or not, but my suggestion is to give it a try. Despite the fact, that on the *MandicMachine* performance – fulfilling my nightmare as a spectator – I ended up behind the curtain as a theoretical corpse, holding an object in my hand, looking like a cut off ring finger.

The above-mentioned attempt, disguised to a monodrama-memoir, is based on a theatrical montage. A Slovenian actor, Marko Mandić, performs it using his various roles from the period between 1996 and 2010. He had quite a few. In this case he lines up 37 from the pieces of Heiner Müller, Sarah Kane, Edna Walsh, Sophocles, Chekhov, Ivo Svetina, Racine, and others. While we are wondering about the progressive choices of pieces made in Ljubljana in the last 20 years, the more significant venues and directors of the contemporary Slovene theatre get lined up in front of us. Flashes of roles appear up to a couple of sentences, keeping their sometimes physical characteristics, gestures, some prop, costume and the music, too. The performance is not based on chronological order, it is rather the text of the monologues that links them together, and though we don't know the actor, we can sense that we are talking about a local king of acting, who – perhaps in his boredom from stone theatre – is using the audience now in order to complete the given fragments of various performances and himself. He draws a mother, a friend, a lover, victims onto the stage, giving them objects, whispering instructions into their ears, then he throws them away in a split second. No one resists, even those who would rather send this collective assistency to hell. We want to help him. Mandić's theater-grinder is completed by

the Via Negativa references. He cites their *Would would not* project here, too: » I've been completely naked 14 times, out of which my penis was not visible 4 times. I've played a masturbation scene four times... actually, I was jerking off. In a show which I've played in the National Theater...« – he says, then he shows panel pictures to the audience, stamped with body liquids, containing places and dates from the »history of the theatre«. In the end he expresses his thanks: »You were good, it's been a pleasure to be with you – he tells to the audience, as if he is talking to his lover in the bed.

Bojan Jablanovec, the quasi-leader of the extensive and open project, the creator of the concepts of the performances, gave a presentation in one of the mornings of Desiré Festival, by the title *Hunt for real*, on the activity of Via Negativa between 2002 and 2008., where the main topic was the seven major sins and which includes the above mentioned *Would would not* (2005), as well. In this performance, they verbalize provocative physical questions directed towards the audience, e.g. if they would like to see the genitals of the performers. In one of the videos we could get an insight to a performance with a *penis-animation*, where the actress calls two volunteers from the audience to join her. They are standing with their backs to the auditorium, while she is making comments on the events, actually having a one-sided petting with them. This performance had to be taken out of repertory – not because of the outcry but the oversubscription of the audience. The provocation was not longer interesting, since they got the tickets for this reason. In the topics of breaking down the wall between the spectators and the performers, we could see

an angry, dietetic performance

and respectively an economic project, researching the value of arts, in which the price of the ticket, specifically the money became the subject of the performance – they spilled blood over it, chewed it, put it in their anus and in the end sold it up for a higher price. My favorite is the opus on the artists' laziness, for which they have invoked the genre of the opera. They went to a theatre festival where they stupefied the audience with romantic arias, while they limited stage action down to zero almost, by their own will. There was one of them who simply peed over the festival flier saying that he is not interested in the event.

Apropos of another Via Negativa piece, we could see behavior poetry on stage, performed by Rok Kravanja. The solo *The brake* of this important performer of the 2010's speaks about the identity through a pop-cultural theme (roller skating). Kravanja is racing in a wild-pink skirt on his roller skates, skillfully bumping into the spectators, too, while he rhythmically repeats some expressions, recites a story with a cheeky smile. Within the crew the ones who dare to ride the skates without a brake are being considered a man, therefore his mates call him a "sissy". But one day he screws off his brakes and learns to race and brake freely. He is racing faster and faster and more dangerously, from time-to-time his skirt gets lifted up, with nothing under it, or he conducts painful – yet rehearsed – falls on beautiful music. The spectators, sitting in a circle, are paying attention with a raising tension nothing bad to happen to him. They are prepared to catch him when he flies, and get relieved when he leaves the imaginary city of misunderstandings and the stage as well, dressed as a backpack, being carried by one of the viewers. It's a subjective performance about the freedom in a good rhythm. It is real and not only because of the bleeding knees.

The third show from Via Negativa on Desiré is the political absurd *On the right way*. It's the paraphrase of *Waiting for Godot*, which also thinks over and makes us think over again the role of theatre within the frames of a dark, poor cabaret. Grega Zorc and Vito

Weiss are members of a rock band, in a clown masquerade, preparing for an upcoming contest while being left alone by the band. Neither the front man nor the rhythm sections showed up, yet they feel they must play the concert, perhaps their predestination is success, and anyway this is the task. They perform the vocal parts of the hits only, one after the other, leaving out the space for the rest by keeping the rhythm with dance, tambourine. They fill out the longer parts with conversations, or rather with polemicizing about their program and they hold self-confidence inducing trainings about their qualities. The story gets a second layer without us realizing it: now it is about a political party which lacks support, an empty political program, and respectively about building a fort out of nothing. In the meantime we were thinking seriously why a similar company couldn't be surrounded by hysterical success and official support in our country.