

Via Negativa on Desiré Festival
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Brakes, no brakes

I am Desiré – as Dezső Kosztolányi would say about himself today, and this is the subtitle of the Desiré Central Station Festival 2013 too, which has been organized for the fifth time by the Kosztolányi Dezső Theater, Subotica. I am Desiré – these are the words that the director, András Urbán stamps on his chest, on the opening of the festival. WRITTEN BY BENCE BÍRÓ He is Desiré, and I am Desiré too, and you too, and everyone who is here. With an unusually humanistic gesture, this year the festival puts the focus on the human itself. What is steady from year to year is the strong graphic layouts of the printed materials, the quality program and the small city celebrating together for a week.

The Slovenian association Via Negativa is the main attraction of the festival. They are – just like in 2009 – present with three performances. Via Negativa is an open, international performing-arts project, with the leadership of the artistic director Bojan Jablanovec. Their provocative performances usually contemplate about problems regarding the stage-audience relationship and the stage reality. We are talking about a project which is being hyped internationally: they had toured around the world, and last year they had an album released with the title “No one should have seen this”, including all their works. They had been to Hungary three times as well: on the last two Theater Festivals in Szeged and in 2008 on the Contemporary Drama Festival in Budapest.

Considering the origins of via negativa: it is a theological term by which theology – on the contrary with its usual practice – tries to define God in a reverse way: it doesn't describe what is God, but what it is not for sure. Grotowski started to use this term to describe the process of the actor recognizing and overcoming his physical and psychic inhibitions. As a continuation of this tradition Bojan Jablanovec had announced the program of stripping the theater in order to be able to study the relation between spectators and performers.

By researching the essence of theater, Via Negativa works on erasing every barrier and brake between viewers and players. In order to achieve this they use the toolbar of performing arts with wide attention: exposed nudity, sexuality, blood and other bodily fluids are frequent parts of their shows. “The audience can take much more than we expected” – says Jablanovec in his lecture, given in the morning at the Desiré Academy. He presents how they produced a happening at the Opera Festival in Zagreb: the performers (I'd name them this way rather than actors) had pissed on the program guide of the festival onstage. In some other performances they put the money payed by the audience into their vaginas or gave handjob to male members of the audience, who were willing to participate – and moreover the spectators weren't even shocked by these things. On the contrary. Via Negativa doesn't do anything that wouldn't had been done by Tristan Tzara, Marija Abramović or Tibor Hajas some decades ago and they ofteneven give references on their big predecessors.

Based on the three performances, hosted by Desiré Festival – which are very different from one another in respect of the tools applied and the concept – we can get a complex picture

about how *Via Negativa* works. *Mandić Stroj* is the one man circus-show of Marko Mandić. Mandić flashes more than 37 theater roles in less than an hour, which he had performed between 1996 and 2010. We can see fragments from the whole palette of the world's drama literature, from Euripid through Chekov to Sarah Kane, and through them a king of actors who is able to play everything. What an actor is, then? A machine, producing emotions, a medium which is able to show huge variety of identities. And who is this Marko Mandić? Each and every of these roles and none of them, at the same time.

Throughout the whole performance, Mandić turns to the audience for help, and uses them for everything what the given role demands. In return the spectators must trust him as many times they find themselves in vulnerable situations and they can never know in advance what they are going to undertake. Surprisingly enough nobody said no to him even though he was naked many times while playing. Everyone took the risk. Seeing this, even those who aren't normally friends of the interactive theater, were willing to go on stage.

Regardless that as everything is happening by his will, the feeling of being exposed to his will as audience members gets amplified. Mandić uses them more as tools than partners. The brake was the one-person show of Rok Kravanja. It was a kind of a poetic performance – using roller-skating as a metaphor. The story is immensely simple: a young boy is being teased by his friends, because he has brakes on his skates, and it is well-known that only girls have brakes. Therefore the boy runs away: first to the girls, then – after breaking down his brake – back to the boys, fed up with the forced compliance in the end, so he simply goes out into the world. The story of self-discovery and acceptance, vanquishing the difficulties, and personal freedom can be seen in three steps: with brakes, without them and then in real freedom.

The subjectivity of Kravanja, his zest, physical performance and the self-ironic smile garrishing on his face was enchanting. It's a touching moment when he dances ballet to Céline Dion's *I'm your lady*. The audience is sitting in a circle and Kravanja, looking deeply into their eyes, runs rounds in front of them. The level of danger is raising with the speed: performer and spectator are concentrating together to avoid the tumble. Though it's a real possibility. After the boy makes peace with himself he has only one wish left: to find a partner. He kicks off the rollerblades and dresses into a huge rucksack to have himself taken on the back and carried out by a man, who he had picked in advance from the audience.

The third performance, *On the right tack*, is a paraphrase of *Waiting for Godot*. A political absurd, according to the playbill. Two background singers are waiting for the frontman, who just doesn't ever seem to arrive. The vocalists are doing their job like machines, as the program says, while the big opportunity slips away in front of them: they could step out, break out from the regular cycle and take over the place of the solo singer. Short Beckett dialogues and refrains of international hits are exchanging each other in a wizard tempo, keeping the rhythms with terrific precision. The lyrics cleverly resonate on the story: *Time is on my side, Nothing's gonna stop us now, I feel free, Come together*, etc. The background singers leave their little stage for a short time to come to the rampe, but then they return to the place they are well accustomed to, as if nothing has happened. Maybe next time – they say. – Supposing that he won't come then, either. He will not come.

While *Mandić Stroj* and *The Brake* show something totally personal, and reflect on the relation between performer and audience directly, *On the right track* is a classical performance. With scenery, costumes and acting. With every kind of theatrical brakes and

with that well known fourth wall. It is shown well that the ones who are playing do not react when the audience interrupts the performance with applause. 'On the right track' contradicts the concept of Via Negativa, as formulated by Bojan Jablanovec on the Desiré Academy. Is it possible, that their path will turn back to the conventions of theater? Is maybe that the right track?

What is undoubtedly typical in all three performances is that the ones playing the roles are exposed to vigorous physical stress. Jumping from role to role, roller-skating for one hour, or keeping the rhythm and pauses precisely – all demand a high level of concentration, therefore the brilliant performance of the performers takes an impressive effect on the audience. The invested work and energy can be seen and felt in every moment.

The creators of Via Negativa are questioning theater-conventions. Their performances are built on complex thoughts, although sometimes the execution is not able to go into real depths. Their intention to parry the obstacles of the communication in theater often leads to not using the proposed tools of the medium of theater at all. Bypassing the brakes which keep theater inside its frames is a dangerous area. Both performers and spectators can easily fall into the trap of oversimplification of thoughts. The meaning often becomes one-dimensional: both in MandićStroj and On the right track.

Several Hungarian authors (Krétakör, Panodráma, Schermann Márta) are working on problems of the truth and reality, the possibilities of communication between theater and reality, spectator and performer, but unfortunately we can rarely see so hazardous attempts as the ones of Via Negativa on our stages.