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Irmela Kästner

Self-Irony – A Sweaty Business

Lovers of Italian opera would perhaps be shocked. Not that there was bad singing on stage, but some might understand the following vision as frivolous or as a violation of the established seriousness of opera: Nabucco, the chorus of slaves, the singers dressed in black and among them a tipsy clown rummaging for beer in a plastic bag. The Slovenian group Via Negativa takes art very seriously, if not deadly serious. So seriously that the art they present on stage goes beyond extreme toward absurdity and as such can no longer exist.

In contrast, the energetic performance of opera arias seems self-evident. It is precisely this contrast between Via Negativa and Viva Verdi that is at the forefront of this work. Some performers strive to create an engaged performance that vacillates from the slightly funny to the shockingly genial. Others simply stand on the stage, sing something because thousands have sung before them and harvest the applause. And yet the crazed individualists of Via Negativa are sufficiently intelligent not to play one against the other, but instead take aim at the art of performance itself. The performance takes place under the banner of sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. Via Negativa has created a series of performance pieces based on each of the seven deadly sins and in this way is “approaching truth along the darkest pathway.”

The producer Gordana Vuk, in the framework of the “The Other Opera in Kampnagel,” calls into question the staging of opera and first has to endure a verbal assault from the announcer. When the announcer ends his insulting tirade of the producer, he urinates on the playbill and demonstratively leaves the stage. The theme is obstruction. The work does not exist. The staging of the work will not take place. The lights on the stage go up, the auditorium is illuminated, the technicians take a break, there are no more illusions – authentic reality enters. It is pure physical activity, the result of which is sweat. The intense concentration of a performer who sticks her finger deep into the throat, gagging herself, is as artfully perfected as a performers who strives to sing high C.

Via Negativa plays with the notion of the natural productivity of the body in the most absurd and creative way possible. For this reason, there is a healthy sarcasm in their performance pieces. They are precisely and intelligently thought out and never obscene or revolting. At the beginning of this piece, seven actors sit in chairs that are arranged in a row on the stage.

Each person introduces himself, explains his personal strategy, and the role that he or she will play that evening. One female performer immediately rejects the charge that they are copying other groups such as Forced Entertainment or Gob Squad as she lists the workshops in which she has participated. Another female performer stands up and begins an excessive dance in which she produces ample quantities of sweat that she then tries to decant into a glass. In the end, she succeeds in gathering fifty drops. Then the performers climb naked onto a pile of trash and squat motionless on top of it. In the end, they manage to fill the glass with sweat gathered from inside a garbage bag.

This is followed by the entrance of a number of soloists from the Zagreb Opera House who proceed to feverishly and enthusiastically sing famous arias from Verdi's operas such as Rigoletto, La Traviata, and others. Viva Verdi premiered at the Eurokaz Festival in Zagreb and are not outsiders on the Kampnaglo stage. In the end, the chorus of the Hamburg Choral Academy joins the other performers on stage. At that moment, we feel the presence of a crowd in a state of reconciliation, domesticity, and comfort, a far cry from the crazy, inexorable, and exhausting lone struggle of the individual performer. In the end, we get the feeling that everyone knows that an opera without clowns is a rather melancholy affair.