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November 2008

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"I am proud to be an experimental artist"

Would Would Not; Out

Via Negativa (SLO) Contemporary Drama Festival, 2008

The 'via negativa' is a negative theology found in all the great religions, the essence of which is that the god, gods, deity cannot be grasped through positive statements, all we can know about him is that we do not - that is, we can only make statements about him using negative terms.

The 'via negativa' is a fundamental concept of Jerzy Grotowski's theatre work, a method of actor training that "is not aimed at the actor learning something, but at removing the obstacles that his own organism may raise in the course of his mental processes"[1].

Via Negativa is a Slovenian theatre-performer group that refers to these two traditions in its work. Unlike Negative Theology, however, it does not even make negative statements, but only asks questions; unlike Grotowski, it is neither concerned with theological issues nor with perfecting the actor's skills. The 'via negativa' in their case means that they try to reduce the performance to the relationship between the spectator and the actor in real space and real time, and through this reduction to question the basic principles of the theatre.

Their productions are primarily defined by the following proposition and its consequences: the aforementioned spectator-actor relationship is nothing other than "a complex flow of opinions, expectations, judgments, conclusions, insights, stereotypes, delusions, prejudices, tolerance or intolerance, knowledge or ignorance"[2], which evokes different emotions - rational and irrational - from both parties. The company is looking for theatrical strategies that make this flow alive and keep it alive. And the most effective way to do this is to produce a production that does not live up to expectations, breaking down stereotypes and pushing the boundaries of tolerance.

To put it another way, the creators of Via Negativa believe that theatre is not about answers, but about questions, about asking questions. There are two strategies for confronting the questions posed: on the one hand, to lure the spectator into the illusion of answers, into the world of the imagination, and on the other hand, to initiate a kind of game with reality, with the real. The Slovenian company has opted for the latter method, trying to involve the audience in a game, which must never forget that it is only a game, albeit a game that is taken very seriously (at least on their part).

Via Negativa was founded in 2002 by Bojan Jablanovec, who is the director of the performances. The composition of the company is not permanent, but is selected in annual workshops, with participants joining the group for shorter or longer periods. It is no coincidence that they often define themselves not as a company but as an international project (current members include Serbian, Croatian and Irish artists). The performances are the result of the collective work of the participants, the scenes that make up the productions are often solo, "little performances" by the individual artists.

Between 2002 and 2008, the company presented seven productions on the theme of the seven cardinal sins. According to Via Negativa's interpretation, these cardinal sins are "the main aspects of human nature" with which the individual is in constant inner conflict. On the one hand, man tries to overcome these instincts, to control them, to conform to social norms, and on the other hand, he seeks to release them, breaking free from the limits he has set for himself. The annual workshops were thematically linked to the principal sin at issue, i.e. the presentations were shaped by these workshops.

The Contemporary Drama Festival featured two productions in the series: *Would Would Not*, produced in 2005, focuses on lust, while the company's latest production, *Out*, focuses on pride.

The creators do not, however, explore the principal sins or human aspects in philosophical abstraction, but - since, as I said, their aim is to reduce the performance to a viewer-actor relationship in real space and time - strictly in the context of the theatre. They do not ask what is prurient or prideful, but raise issues such as how does nudity or (sexually charged) exhibitionism on stage affect the spectator, or how far can the actor go in his arrogance towards the audience? Answers are not expected, but reactions are, since the audience's reaction is a major factor in the development of the performances.

It follows from the above that the main characteristics of the productions are the responsibility passed on to the audience, provocativeness and strong physicality. The three criteria are closely linked in both performances, but are presented differently in the two cases. In both *Would Would Not* and *Out*, we are presented with a series of relatively discrete scenes, or

more precisely scene-frames, which must be complemented by the reactions of the audience. In fact, the most interesting aspect of the performances (for me) was precisely the observation of audience reactions - how long they follow the performers, what they still do and what they no longer do, and why they do it if they do.

In *Would Would Not*, the reactions were more direct, literally more physical, than in *Out*, where the actors challenge members of the audience on stage. The way a scene unfolds depends both on whether or not someone even dares to be a participant in the events and on how they behave in the situation. The situations created by the characters are always sexually charged: one of the female characters asks two male spectators to eat chocolate syrup from her elbows, her ankles, or between her two knees, or to lick honey off her. Another actress strips naked and then borrows items of clothing from the men in the audience - from hats and sweaters to shirts and trousers, which she also receives from one of the spectators. One scene, however, is not shown at all, as instead of the two necessary contractors (whose penises one of the actresses wants to 'animate'), there is only one. The spectators may even surprise the audience with their behaviour: when one of the actors asks the audience for someone to help him repeat an actionist performance (in which the artist nails his own penis to a board), one of the spectators, already holding a hammer, agrees to do so, when the actor admits that he did not expect anyone to respond to his request. The female audience is basically spared direct participation, although one of the characters 'picks' a lady for himself, from whom he asks for (and gets) her panties at the end of the performance.

In *Out*, the provocation (rather than the direct interaction) lies in the "disorder" and unpredictability of the performance. The actors explore the 'logic' of arrogance, that is, they create situations in which, accompanied by strong physical 'frills', nothing is actually presented (one actor drinks a litre and a half of water in one go, another strips naked and foaming at the mouth, demanding the script, etc.), and because nothing presented on stage is incomprehensible to the audience, the actors eject them from the space. At least they try, but the audience remains in their seats, so the performance continues. In other words, in the case of *Out*, it is not the development of a single scene that depends on the reaction of the audience, but the length of the production in particular, since after repeated requests the audience does indeed leave the theatre - although the actors would certainly continue the play if the audience had not left. However, the length of a scene can also be greatly influenced by audience reaction, e.g. when the actors 'play' dogs and bark loudly in packs, demanding that the audience throw their coloured rubber balls back to them, some audience members do not throw them back immediately, but allow the actors to bark, howl and jump around nervously for long minutes (many of them naked). In fact, we are left puzzled as to how to end the protracted scene at all, since it seems that neither keeping the ball nor throwing it back can succeed.

Finally, another common feature of the two performances is self-reflexivity, which is closely linked to the way in which the creators place the phenomena of lust and pride in a theatrical context. Thus, in *Would Would Not*, the question of the use of nudity for its own sake is raised: one of the characters, while standing naked on stage, reflects that he could deliver any great monologue, but that his penis would still have a "stronger stage presence" than his own. And in *Out*, we are confronted with the actor's carefree exhibitionism, as all the actors' actions are aimed at making themselves seen, and all their words are about why they are proud of themselves. I am proud to be an experimental artist."