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Via Negativa: Out

Slovenia-based performing arts project Via Negativa explores the sin of pride in its experimental performance, Out.

Part of the Editor's Choice series.



Via Negativa, Out. Perforations Festival, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club. Photo by Marcandrea.

The Perforations Festival occurs annually in Croatia and features artists not subsidized by the state. This March the festival traveled with a select few to the East Village's La Mama theater. Via Negativa, a performing-arts project based in Slovenia exploring the seven deadly sins over seven years, performed Out, which tackled pride—the final sin in the series, the deadliest, and the one, perhaps, most closely linked to the medium of theater.

Five seconds into the performance I sneeze and a bald, slovenly dressed and slouching man reading a book onstage looks at me with a smirk and a raised eyebrow before pointedly (and quite smugly)

recrossing his legs, with a blatant flip of slippered ankle for (unneeded) emphasis. I had an idea then what kind of performance I was in for. Soon he lifted his shirt and stuck a pencil in his belly button, shuffling slowly and wordlessly about the stage. An hour and a half later I was playing ball with a pack of mostly naked Eastern Europeans pretending to be dogs.

The show unfolds via seemingly individual performance pieces that each approach and exercise the sin in their own way. Like a long line of pendulums, each sent separately into motion, the players move in and out of sync with one another. Near misses, evolving rhythms, collisions, and disruptions reveal half-formed patterns and an emerging dialogue in which the audience is again and again asked to enter: at first the actors provoke us with glances, then they direct questions at us. Finally, with the aforementioned game of fetch, roles are switched and the performers—now demanding to be entertained by their viewers—are panting (with their tongues hanging out), longing to catch a ball, like a thought, from across the room. At some point we are told to get out and each of us is given the uncomfortable choice to decide for ourselves when the performance is over.

Via Negativa's approach tests the relationship between performer and spectator, employing metatheatricality, conditional constructs, and role reversal to play with audience expectations. Their website states, "Our aim is simple: to give the audience and ourselves a chance to be alive in this artificial situation." We are still being manipulated. And entertained. Tension is built up and released—through humor, through violence. Somewhere in the middle of *Out* a text is demanded, withheld, and—after an excruciating one-man shouting match by a formerly silent performer—produced from between the buttocks of an actress posing as a mushroom (pulled "out of her ass," so to speak). The text addresses the audience and is, at turns, gracious, apologetic, passive-aggressive, and accusatory. The scene emphasizes the nature of the tension central to Via Negativa's performance, one that distinguishes it from "traditional" practices—we are constantly aware that we are being manipulated and challenged to do something about it. It's an unnerving gauntlet to walk past on the way out (when you do decide, finally, to leave), one that hangs about you unfulfilled, daring you to be real in the artificial world.

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