

Interview with Bojan Jablanovec about Manipulations
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Manipulations for real values

Manipulations is a performance developed as a co-production of five institutions (theatres and/or international theatre festivals) that play an important role both in their home countries as well as in the Banat region. We have interviewed Bojan Jablanovec (Via Negativa), the director of the piece developed by the participants.

The title of the performance is Manipulations and according to the presentation it deals with the concept of The Absolute. At first sight it seems to be a huge and deeply philosophical topic. How can you approach it with the means of theatre?

I always start my work with mentioning some broad and general subject. Regarding this project I didn't know what kind of performers I could expect to work with, so I decided to offer future participants a wide-ranging working topic hoping that they can connect with my proposal and will feel the challenge and opportunity for personal creative expression. However, from the beginning, this topic was narrowed by my interest in one basic question: "Is there anything that we can absolutely believe in today (not only as individuals but also as a community)?" I believe, we all do. "There must be something", so this became the working title of our developing piece. According to my experiences, during the process the topic permanently changes by the growing material produced. This happened in this project as well. The performers have opened many unexpected windows and doors through which they got closer to the real subject. At a certain point we realized that we are revolving around the question of trust. It was silently present from the beginning, but at first glance none of us could recognize how it connected with the question of belief, although it was so closely connected with our real situation as well. From this moment on I was convinced that we have found the proper direction. For me theatre is a medium by which a certain philosophy (or – since we are not philosophers – a certain way of thinking about conditions and contradictions of the times we are living in) can be embodied. Performing makes body and thought collide, not as enemies but as two different types of perception, two different perceptive fields of our self-awareness. In my opinion they do not exclude but always complete each other, although it looks ever so contradictory. Thoughts come alive in theatre and that makes it so exciting even today. The most challenging creative aim for me in performing arts is to find the situation that can clearly visualize this complex relationship and that is able to have an effect on the audience.

At Via Negativa you have dealt with the Seven Deadly Sins for seven years. You seem to be very interested in theology. Where does it come from?

I'm not interested in theology since theological questions try to resolve conceptions of God. It is more about ontology, about basic conditions of being, existence and reality. The theological God is just a dogmatic ontological answer in which I am not interested. On the other hand we cannot ignore the fact that Western civilization was influenced by the Catholic Church, and that profoundly shaped our individual and social values. Modern Western society is somehow closely related to Catholic traditions. In the first period of Via Negativa I couldn't resist not investigating this relation. There was a big danger in that the general audience and theatre theorists might declare us to be some

kind of religious sect (minimum because of our name, Via Negativa), but from the very beginning we were quite clear about the main focus of our interest. We aim to measure our humanity with the ability to control or suppress our negative drives. All kinds of social structures (communism, capitalism, democracy, socialism – you name it) against which we constantly resist are based on institutions and mechanisms built for developing or replacing this ability. We were interested in the seven deadly sins as the negative characteristics of human nature, the very basic qualities that define us as human beings.

Via Negativa is an open platform, so you work with variable partners instead of a constant team. Could you mention the main advantages and disadvantages of this?

As the director of Via Negativa my first task was to develop a working method that allows performers to become a creative force in these performances. The easiest way to achieve this is making them authors of their work. Beside this I tried to develop creative conditions in which every performer has to fight continuously for the right to be on stage by searching answers for what and why to do. I consider this creative ethic the basic condition for any kind of work. Since the production model always decisively determines the final result, I always focus on the working process. Creation always takes priority over aesthetics, but it doesn't mean that the way of presentation – the form – is not a crucial artistic questions. The form gives the spectator the first information about what you would like to communicate. If the form doesn't fit the message, all the work is lost. 'Content vs. form' is my main artistic battle. I believe that an artist has to fight on both fronts at the same time. If you work all the time with the same people, you find yourself quickly in the prison of form, routine and rigorous patterns of thinking. You can become lazy to find newer and newer answers to the basic questions, you can quickly become tired of reinventing yourself, although this should be your primal work as an artist. That's why I do not believe in running a constant theatre company with permanent members. I admit it helps to bring your "style" to perfection, but I find this type of artistic perfection boring and empty. I'm interested in a more honest position in art, where aesthetic perfection is just the background. I believe in staying fragile, not being afraid of failures, and on your sense of humour and intelligence. I want to see common human beings on my stage and not artistic "superhumans".

As I know you have chosen the actors after a week-long workshop. What were the requirements they had to meet?

I met the applicants this January in Szeged. There were 16 people with different experiences, ambitions and coming from different contexts, some were employed in theatres and others were freelancers. They all knew that maximum ten of them will be chosen. I thought that the most correct decision was to start to work on the project with all of them. This way all participants were immediately in the middle of it and were faced with my request to create performing situations, actions, statements, scenes... All of the performing ideas was appreciated and reflected on by the whole group. There were no special demands concerning performing or physical skills or special acting techniques. After seven days of intense work and discussions it wasn't so difficult to recognise who found my way of working interesting and who was not able inspired to do this type of work. I believe that the energies will start circulating if you give them enough time.

The actors came from four different countries and four different traditions. Was that an advantage or a hurdle?

Actually, the performers came from three countries: Hungary, Serbia and Romania (in the beginning there was also one actor from Montenegro and a young performer from Bulgaria), but by their nationalities, they were all Hungarians, so we couldn't talk about

different traditions. From my point of view, Europe as a whole has the same tradition, I couldn't find big differences in this regard between people involved in Via Negativa's projects. It's true that we have different tempers (energies, temperaments, etc.), but we have the same cultural roots, the same system of values, we swim in the same historical and referential "pool". In my experience national differences in Europe are mostly ideological and exaggerated by politics. True differences are to be found in personalities, aesthetic orientations and the way we think about arts. During the working process I had to reduce such gaps in the group, at least about basic topics. Of course, that never happens without tensions.

Could you describe the process? How did you build up the performance? Was the available time enough?

Time is always the bottleneck, especially in this project. With proper planning most of the difficulties can be avoided, but sometimes I enjoy the daily work so much that I forget about the schedule. Our timetable is so strict now (45 working days) that it forces us to work very intensely; we have to close each working phase with clear aims. At Via Negativa we usually build performances in three steps. At first each performer has to present performing ideas, situations, stories, images related to the given topic. I always encourage performers to choose a form of expression with which they feel most comfortable with. Anything is allowed: verbal, physical, visual expression etc. There are no limits; the emphasis is on creativity without hurdles. The performers start with solo presentations, later they work in pairs or larger groups, but I also like to ask them to propose ideas to the whole team. These are not improvisations. I ask the performers to step on the stage with clear thoughts, with a decision and with some general ideas about their future actions. Each attempt is followed by a long discussion about performing strategies, the relation to the subject, the relationship with the audience. In this project's first phase the performers have created more than 150 different scenes. The next step was to select the scenes that during third step will structure the final performance. When working on the structure, completely new challenges come up: scenes we liked before sometimes do not fit in the composition at all, others will need radical changes. We test different ways to combine our ideas until we feel that the composition of the performance can start to breath properly. There's always a big fight when we are trying to find the proper contents and emotions that will form the "language" of the piece, with special regard on its effect on the audience.