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Confessions of a serial killer

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JUST LIKE its blending of moods - darkly humorous and at times utterly dismal - The Infernal Comedy by Michael Sturminger couples acting with operatic arias by Mozart, Haydn and Vivaldi. Celebrated theatre and cinema virtuoso John Malkovich, the sinister seducer of Stephen Frears' 1988 film Dangerous Liaisons, makes his Greek debut on stage as notorious serial killer Jack Unterweger.

Sturminger's vicious character is based on the real-life story of the Austrian author, journalist and popular figure in the eyes of the Viennese elite. Johann "Jack" Unterweger was convicted for murdering a dozen prostitutes and ended up taking his own life.

Written for an actor, orchestra and two sopranos, the 90-minute-long performance sees Malkovich sharing the stage with the Wiener Akademie Orchestra under the baton of its director Martin Haselbock, while Bernarda Bobro (Louise Fribo on May 26) and Aleksandra Zamojska sing arias.

The Infernal Comedy brings to a close the Attiki Cultural Society's annual Theatre Beyond Borders festival which earlier in the spring brought to Athens theatre greats Robert Wilson and Steven Berkoff.

Before his Athens appearances at the Hellenic World's Cultural Centre, Malkovich took some time to talk to the Athens News about hubris, reality and fiction and the living experience that is theatre.

Athens News: The title, The Infernal Comedy, is a paradox in itself. What prevails? Comedy or tragedy?

John Malkovich: It is a play about a man who fooled a whole society and finally thought he could get away with anything. Serial murderers always want to feel the ultimate power of taking another's life, so the story is about hubris and the wish for omnipotence. The text is funny, odd and archaic. There is a certain bleak and at times absurd charm to Unterweger.

What was your initial reaction to the Unterweger character?

I don't know if I would have been so fascinated by the real Unterweger, but in our play he is a fictional character showing many different colours of human behaviour and confronting us with the possibility of people with two totally different faces. I don't know much about the real Unterweger but I remember thinking I don't believe a single word this man says. I don't think I would have liked him a lot.

Has this changed in the course of studying and practising for the role? Do you sympathise with the character at all?

Whatever character you may play, you are not in the position to judge it, or like it or to sympathise with it. You should try to follow it and find out how he reacted, felt and responded. If you want to show him as good or bad, you will end up with a weak performance.

'I'm longing for the truth as much as you are' is Unterweger's concluding declaration before he takes his life. What is the message of this real-life story?

We are trying to create a fictional character who might be even more interesting because he is searching for the truth inside his own story with a strong passion. There was a great share of narcissism and megalomania involved. He thought he could get away with anything. Like all gifted liars, he started to believe in his own lies.

Since you are the only actor on stage, does the performance take the form of a recital?

Not at all, it is a real play with an orchestra and two sopranos who act together with me. The Arias by Vivaldi, Mozart, Haydn and Webber sang by the two sopranos give voice to Unterweger's victims.

In what ways does music move the story forward?

The music is so strong that you have to obey it.

Is it a distracting or a liberating experience to have an orchestra sharing the stage with you?

To work with orchestra musicians and singers is an extraordinary experience because the music hits you as if you were running into a house. You cannot go against it. You have to find doors or windows to get in.

You have made an impact on both theatre and cinema. In which of the two do you feel more at home?

Playing and directing for theatre has always been my first medium and this has never changed. Although I appreciate working in the movies, I enjoy the direct contact with the audience in a theatre. Theatre is a living experience and reminds you of life because you have to be there and because it's ephemeral. I very often return to the theatre to act, direct or do both.

As a theatre student you had neglected your last graduation requirement. Do you believe that acting is a talent one is born with?

Besides talent you need curiosity and a lot of discipline. You need to be a hard worker and very much concentrated on what you do.

In times of crisis does theatre need to redefine itself in order to survive?

Theatre has always been in crisis since it was invented in your great country and it will redefine itself and keep on changing to stay alive. Theatre lives for the moment, off the moment, in the moment. Movies are not like that. They are much more manipulated.

- Michael Sturminger's *The Infernal Comedy* is on at the amphitheatre of the Hellenic World's Cultural Centre (254 Pireos St, Tavros, tel 212-254-0315) on May 25-26, 9.30pm. With Greek supratitles. Tickets range from 35 to 150 euros and are available from the venue, Public in Syntagma and 152-154 Grigoriou Lambraki St in Piraeus. On the net: www.tbb.gr

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