



Luminato

The Infernal Comedy

John Malkovich takes the stage for Luminato

|By Glenn Sumi

THE INFERNAL COMEDY: CONFESSIONS OF A SERIAL KILLER written and directed by Michael Sturminger, with John Malkovich, Bernarda Bobro, Marie Arnet and the Vienna Academy Orchestra. Massey Hall. Final performance Saturday (June 12) at 8 pm. \$55-\$125. Massey Hall (178 Victoria). 416-872-4255. luminato.com
Rating: NNN

Kudos to the Luminato Festival for opening its 10-day festival Friday with [The Infernal Comedy](#), a bold, high-concept experiment that blends the real-life story of an Austrian serial killer with Baroque opera - and then some.

Although one of the obvious draws is actor John Malkovich, this is anything but your usual star-turn in a predictable role. After an overture by the Vienna Academy Orchestra vigorously conducted by Thomas Haselböck, the intense Oscar-nominee bounds onstage in a white suit, polka dot shirt and sunglasses, stealing the applause meant for the musicians, while Haselböck shakes his head.

In an indeterminate accent, Malkovich gives shoutouts to the city and Massey Hall, informally chats us up, then sits down at a desk where he seems to be selling books. He is, if we didn't know it already, fully in character as Jack Unterweger, the convicted murderer who was also a poet, journalist and author later suspected of killing prostitutes in Vienna, Prague and Los Angeles.

Jack is also dead. He tells us this early, so the show seems to be happening in some purgatory where he can reappear to confess his crimes - and plug his tell-all book. Two sopranos (Bernarda Bobro and Marie Arnet) are present to sing arias that illustrate examples of women in his life, from his mother, who gave birth to him when she was a teen then let her father raise him, through to the various women he met and murdered.

The vocal sections - from Vivaldi, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and others - work well at adding layers of meaning to the tabloid-like material. Arnet's simple aria about being a scorned young wife takes on lots of emotional resonance as Jack kneels before her and feels her belly as if to acknowledge his unborn self.

Later on, his interactions with the women change as he seduces, is seduced and becomes increasingly violent. These staged scenes are a remarkable way to enter the mind and imagination of the sociopath, and as Jack himself admits, the arias have the ability to touch regions of your soul you never dared of calling your own.

It's a shame Jack's own confessions - often delivered from a desk as if reading from a manuscript - aren't as compelling. At times they're aimless rants, at other times pseudo-philosophical musings about the nature of truth.

It's never clear who or what Jack is. A failed artist? A tortured soul? A megalomaniac? A misunderstood son?

Writer/director Michael Sturminger seems to suggest he's all of these - and none.

Still, Malkovich is astonishing at evoking an unpredictable, slightly smug character who can change in a second. He's gregarious and charming one moment, sinister and menacing the next. When he's enraptured by one of the women's songs, his face can default into an expression of such animalistic, primal puzzlement and wonder that he does seem

capable of such extremes.

