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Malkovich to portray notorious serial killer Jack Unterweger

By James Bradshaw

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In The Infernal Comedy, John Malkovich brings a vile serial killer back to life

Night after night this summer, being John Malkovich will mean slipping into the skin of a serial killer.

The redoubtable American actor is affecting the mannerisms of a psychopath, touring his role as a resurrected Jack Unterweger, the famous Austrian writer and notorious murderer of prostitutes.

In some ways, the real challenge of portraying Unterweger is in recreating his sweeter side. Unterweger was popular with women and had many followers, fans and supporters - won over by his intellect and apparent reformation during a 15-year prison stint. The play even begins with a musical excerpt from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Don Juan*.

"I've heard that he was very gentle - I mean, when he wasn't serial killing. I've heard that he could be very charming. He clearly had a fairly good sense of humour," Malkovich says over the phone from Recklinghausen, Germany, where the show recently made a five-day stop.



Morris Mac Matzen / Reuters

John Malkovich performs on stage during the theatre play 'The Infernal Comedy - Confessions of a serial killer' in Hamburg, May 16, 2010.

Now, *The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer* comes to Toronto for a two-night run at the Luminato Festival before a stop in Quebec and more shows in Europe. And it has generated sufficient buzz that Arthaus Musik has just released a DVD of one of the original Vienna performances.

The opera-play features Malkovich as an already dead Unterweger, decked out in a white suit and black-with-white-polka-dots shirt, returning to give a talk about his new autobiography to the assembled audience.

Backing Malkovich are the Vienna Academy Orchestra, conductor Martin Hasselböck (a co-creator of *Infernal Comedy*) and a pair of sopranos, and they all get drawn into the action as Malkovich's monologues are interwoven with music by Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn, among others.

The work, written and directed by Michael Sturminger, veers from darkly comic to just plain dark as Unterweger charms his victims (as well as the audience) with humour. But, says Malkovich, part of the great tension the play creates is that the viewers "find that [charm] questionable" - they know what he's capable of, but can't ignore his allure.

Unterweger claimed his mother was a prostitute who left him to be raised by his grandfather, who he described as a violent womanizer. After a degenerate and destitute adolescence punctuated by episodes of violent behaviour, he was sentenced to life in prison in 1976 for murdering a teenage girl by strangling her with her own bra.

Unterweger's studies in the prison library led him to pen a series of poems, plays and short stories, as well as a 1984 autobiography called *Purgatory*, which made him a literary star and *cause célèbre*. He was deemed to have been rehabilitated by the time he was paroled in 1990, after serving the minimum possible sentence, and became a public figure, appearing in television debates dressed like a dandy.

But he returned to old habits within months of his release, murdering as many as 11 more women in Austria, Czech Republic and Los Angeles, and then brazenly "investigating" the murders as a journalist interested in the dangers faced by prostitutes. He was eventually recaptured, only to commit suicide in his cell.

Malkovich was in Germany and Austria at the time Unterweger's case was making headlines, and knows the grim tale well. He has even read some of Unterweger's work, but found it "underwhelming" and never bothered reading *Purgatory*. "I just don't think he's much of a writer. I mean, he's no Jack Henry Abbott, in other words," Malkovich says, referring to another famed writer-criminal whose life bears a hauntingly similar trajectory to Unterweger's.

Malkovich copes with the task of repeatedly delving into Unterweger's complex and deranged psyche by keeping a safe distance from it. "It doesn't really have anything to do with me," he says in his trademark soft, halting speech, adding: "In the end, quite simply, you're playing someone else. But this is also a work of fiction, and operatic fiction at that, so I don't think it should be confused with the real person, really."

That distance allows Malkovich to reinvent Unterweger in each performance. "It just sort of goes through me," he says. "I use the metaphor of surfing, but I'm not the wave; the wave is the collision between the material and the public. I just ride it. That's what I've been doing my whole life on stage. And sometimes you fall off - even often - but you try to ride the wave that's created."

After amassing literally hundreds of acting, producing and directing credits over more than 30 years, not to mention playing a founding role in Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, Malkovich seems energized by the challenge of doing something so adventurous and musical.

"This seemed like a marriage that could be very interesting. And also, I was very attracted to the sheer power of the music, and how to get out of the way of it, how to walk with it, how to run from it, and maybe sometimes, if it goes really well, how to kind of harness it," he says.

"But that's rather more difficult than I'd anticipated."

The Infernal Comedy plays at 8 p.m. June 11 and 12 at Massey Hall in Toronto. Tickets:
www.luminato.com/2010/events/126

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