

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Malkovich divinely seduces in The Infernal Comedy



The actor is mesmerizing as a twisted killer, but the audience is left to paw at the surface of a deranged mind

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### **The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer**

*Written and directed by Michael Sturminger*

*Conducted by Martin Haselböck*

*Starring John Malkovich, Bernarda Bobro and Marie Arnet*

*At Massey Hall in Toronto*

With his purring voice and vaguely Mephistophelean features, John Malkovich has frequently been tapped to play seductive villains on screen. In *The Infernal Comedy*, which made its North American debut Friday at Toronto's Luminato Festival, he brings a particularly slippery real-life monster to the stage.

Malkovich portrays Johann (Jack) Unterweger, the Austrian serial killer-cum-writer, who beguiled Vienna's literati even as he secretly strangled as many as 11 prostitutes in a 1990s killing spree. It's a role to which the actor brings all his wit and mesmerizing stage presence, though neither quite compensates for the show's awkward structure and unsatisfactory text.

The work, conceived by Malkovich, Austrian writer-director Michael Sturminger and Vienna Academy Orchestra conductor Martin Haselböck, is a curious hybrid of dramatic monologues and operatic arias. The conceit is that Unterweger, who committed suicide in 1994, has come back from the dead to promote a new, tell-all autobiography. His publisher has suggested dressing up his reading with a pair of young sopranos to represent the women in his life – apparently unaware of the effect they might have on this literal ladykiller.

At first, our infamous author is well-behaved. Dressed in a crisp white suit and polka-dot shirt, he indulges in patter and pours on the charm. He jokes about his Schwarzenegger-esque Austrian accent. He wades into the audience like a daytime TV host, quizzing us about our sex lives. He expounds on the complexities of the female psyche. "Women, they can really make me lose my mind!" he exclaims, earning this smiling sociopath one of many ironic laughs. For a time, the show lives up to its title – it's hellishly funny.

But when the sopranos appear, singing tragic arias from the classical repertoire, Jack really does lose it. He can't leave off pawing them, caressing them, foisting bouquets and Sachertortes upon them. And when this killer, notorious for garroting his victims with their own underclothes, starts outfitting

each lady with a brassiere, we know nothing good will come of it.

The arias, by Mozart, Vivaldi, Beethoven, Haydn and Weber, could be meant as expressions of Jack's inner turmoil, or as the laments of his victims. In any case, they are beautifully sung by Marie Arnet and Bernarda Bobro, backed by Haselböck's onstage orchestra – Bobro, in particular, gives a bravura performance of Hayden's harrowing *Scena di Berenice*. They don't further the piece dramatically, however; they're just diverting interludes.

Malkovich's Jack, meanwhile, becomes increasingly unhinged, as does Sturminger's script. Having successfully shown us Unterweger's disarming appeal, it now tries to be a commentary on the nature of truth. Firing up a laptop, Jack angrily scrolls through his biography on Wikipedia and critiques its errors – only to admit some of them are derived from his own dishonest writings. As the reading becomes an admitted shambles ("This is not a very well-organized evening," Jack apologizes at one point) the show itself resorts to aimless stage business and cop-outs about Jekyll not being able to know Hyde.

Before *The Infernal Comedy* premiered in Vienna last summer, it had a test run in L.A. in 2008 under the title *Seduction and Despair*. As it exists now, the work is certainly seductive thanks to Malkovich. The star of *Dangerous Liaisons* hasn't lost his gift for purveying sugar-coated evil.

The despair is another matter. Where the piece needs original monologues plumbing the agony that led this loved and celebrated writer to compulsively murder, we're only given borrowed arias instead. We come away impressed by Malkovich's acting skills, but feeling we've only scratched the surface of his character's black soul.

**The Infernal Comedy** has one more Toronto performance, on Saturday, June 12. It plays the Festival Grand Rire in Quebec City on June 14.