

STURMINGER: The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer (2010)

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Drama for one actor, two singers and orchestra  
Performers: John Malkovich, actor/Laura Aiken, soprano/Aleksandra Zamojska, soprano/Orchester Wiener Akademie/Martin Haselboeck cond.  
Studio: ArtHaus Musik DVD 101 517 [Distr. by Naxos]

Video: 1.77:1 for 16:9 color  
Audio: PCM Stereo  
Subtitles: English, German, French, Spanish  
All regions  
Extras: Rehearsal footage; History of Unterweger's crimes  
Length: 102 minutes; 43 minutes (extras)

Rating: \*\*\*\*

In 1976, Jack Unterweger--the so-called "Vienna Woods Killer"--was convicted for the murder of Margaret Schaefer and sentenced to life in prison. Committing himself to reading and literature, Unterweger published his autobiography *Fegefeuer* (Purgatory), a bestseller that convinced authorities to release him on parole in 1960. Afterwards, a growing number of female prostitutes in Vienna, Graz, Prague, and Los Angeles disappeared -- only later found to have been strangled. Unterweger somehow escaped surveillance and fled to Miami, where the FBI caught up with him; in 1994 Unterweger was tried and found guilty on nine counts of murder. He used a string from his jumpsuit as a noose and hanged himself in prison.

Producer Matthias Leutzendorff has mounted a disturbing psychodrama, the staging of Michael Sturminger's *The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer*, starring John Malkovich as Jack Unterweger, a sociopath whose literary talents earned him the status of someone "redeemed" by the power of art. Given at Vienna's Romacher Theater, with costume designs by Birgit Hutter--a table filled with copies of Unterweger's book for sale, at which he sits and expounds on his manias--and assorted soprano arias from Vivaldi, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Boccherini, Weber, and Beethoven, the expressionist play exploits the French notion (via Antonin Artaud) of the Theater of Cruelty, drama meant to wring our hearts and minds as we confront social crises and

questions of conscience. As Unterweger exclaims, “My name is Jack, and I kill prostitutes, so you know what that means.” Thus, with full credit to Jack the Ripper, our protagonist makes a habit of strangling his victims with their own brassieres.

The bonus item, “Inside The Infernal Comedy,” engages the various creators of the play, each of whom—while the camera gives us documentary glimpses of the real Unterweger in various public personae—comments on the etiology of the drama. Many embraced the theatrical medium as an “expression for women and about women—his victims—who sing, lament, and die.” And Unterweger receives the music of Gluck and Mozart, as though he were a Don Juan, a man smooth at wooing and flattering women, only so can destroy them. “I was able to climb the social ladder to certain privileges,” quips Malkovich in his Unterweger persona, and so he killed “a football team’s worth of women.” Yes, “fame and notoriety can be lethal in the wrong hands.” Was it all because of his mother? Jack Unterweger had an obsession with “truth,” but he was unable to express it. He kills one woman because “I had been lying to her, and I knew she would never be able to forgive me.” Soprano Aikin remarks, “Unterweger was exceedingly vain—so typical of short men. “The Prison Bard” the Austrian newspapers deemed Unterweger. Even his suicide: was it a dramatic ploy? “He used a noose just short enough to require he stand on his tiptoes,” offers a journalist, “and he knew that the guard on suicide watch would look in. What he didn’t count on is that a witness might not intervene. . .”

Malkovich himself is a noted risk-taker of an actor, a “method” practitioner who relishes his own dark side. Writer-director Sturminger incorporates a series of soprano arias, perhaps—as in Pasolini’s movie *Accatone!*—to humanize his subject, provide a soul to an unrepentant rake and murderer that even he denies. Laura Aikin enacts Soprano I and Aleksandra Zamojska plays Soprano II, each of them delivering brilliant coloratura arias like Mozart’s “Vorrei spiegarvi, oh dio” and Beethoven’s “Ah, perfido,” each of them a testament to love betrayed. In the course of their respective deliveries, Malkovich would stalk, seduce, bait, and even strangle them in a litany of his obsessions. He even goes after a female violinist in the chamber orchestra—the Vienna Academy Orchestra conducted by Martin Haselboeck. Unterweger offers his mother as a source of his attraction and fatal hatred of women, but he just as quickly denies that she was either Austrian or a prostitute.

What Sturminger has concocted endures as a gallows-humor indictment of the cult of celebrity, since Unterweger’s poetry lifted him “to a person of interest,” and not your average compulsive murderer. The literati demanded his release in the pursuit of “social justice.” He transcended his status as “a case study” and became an admired icon, “because some women just want to screw a murderer.” At one point, he lies down beside a fallen victim, manipulating her mouth while he encourages us to purchase three copies of his book! Just as ironically, the overture to this wild passion play is Gluck’s storm music from *Orfeo ed Eurydice*, a true moment of “Orpheus Descending” to the underworld of his own spites. Unterweger addresses us in

English, he says, since “English is the language of love.” Didn’t another celebrity call English “the language of deception”? Unterweger has a habit of embracing his women low around the waist and stroking their abdomens, a fascination with the womb? He wanders into the orchestra, even relieving the conductor of his burden, “orchestrating” his own passion music. Malkovich walks around and through the set as if in a trance, a remnant of Conrad Veidt’s Cesare from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Has Unterweger been the puppet of irrational impulses, or is he something we created and unleashed, a twisted Prometheus unbound? At the end, having made all preparations for his suicide, Unterweger refuses: “If you think I’m going to hang myself, you’re f----- crazy. I’ve already done that. But come back tomorrow night and see if I’ve changed my mind.” Pleasant dreams.

-- Gary Lemco

[This must have been something to attend live in the concert hall! The image quality and sound are first rate, but it would have been nice if ArtHaus had provided English supertitles for the sopranos' songs – especially since Malkovitch speaks in English (with a Viennese accent that comes and goes)! Though mostly cruel and shocking, *The Infernal Comedy* does have its comedy; such as when Unterweger has a complete fit over not wanting to fuss with the MacBook the event's producers furnished him to report an online summary of his exploits...Ed.]