

I THE WEEKENDER I

## A gothic horror tale of love and madness

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTO COURTESY OF TANZTHEATER DES STAATSTHEATERS DARMSTADT

Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt more than lived up to the dance theater portion of their name on Friday night with artistic director Lin Mei-hong's (*Schwanengesang* (Swan Song) at the National Theater.

It was a brilliant piece of theater, even though the number of strangulations was exceedingly high for a dance production, and some of the scenes will surely give viewers nightmares for months to come. Forget *Giselle*, with its "mad" scene and vengeful Willis, Lin has conjured up a gothic horror tale of love, obsession, madness and death that will be hard to beat — all the more amazing for being performed by a cast of just 15 dancers. George Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte* may have been published in 1892, but at its heart is a tale for the ages, and Lin's choreography gave it a very modern edge.

Most of the dancers played multiple roles, beginning as doppelgangers to the protagonist Hugo (danced by Simone Deriu) and his wife Marie (danced by Andressa Miyazato), dressed in identical suits for the men and a platinum, 1930s permed wig and a spaghetti-strap, long slip dress for the women. It was hard to tell who was who, and that was the point. The story of Hugo's obsessive love for his dead wife could have been about any one of them, or all of us. The 10 dancers who were not the leads also performed as a flock of nuns, then swans and then demons — some of them must have been changing costumes right in the wings.

The other three leads were also exceptional: Tatiana Marchini as Hugo's housekeeper Barbe, whose devotion turns to unrequited passion; the long-limbed Eszter Kozar as Mariette — the Marie look-alike who Hugo becomes besotted with — and especially Laszlo Kocsis as the specter of the dead Marie. Each time Kocsis appeared in his Kabuki-white body paint and slip dress, with a long grayish clump of hair trailing down one side of his head, he would tiptoe on, arms upraised as if posing for a Grecian urn drawing, looking somewhat lost. Then his torso would contract, the arms would tilt awkwardly and his face contort — you could see Marie's body decaying with every move he took. The black-robed and hooded Bengt Ekerot may have created an indelible impression as Death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, but Kocsis has created an image that will be hard for anyone who sees him to forget.

Thomas Gruber, who did the staging and costumes, designed a deceptively simple set that was little more than a large black platform that took up most of the stage, with a narrow strip of a canal in front of it, a large wardrobe that doubled as a door front and a bench for the judge from hell, noose-like bell pulls and a panel of lilies that hugged one side of the proscenium.

The edgy, jazz score was by Michael Erhad. As a choreographer, Lin appears to be at the height of her powers. She has created a very dark work, but the darkness never overwhelms the audience, and at *Schwanengesang*'s core are some amazingly beautiful duets and solos.

Lin has been artistic director of the Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt since 2004 — and at the Dortmund theater for five years before that — and it's hard to believe it has taken so long to bring this terrific Taiwanese choreographer and her company to Taiwan. Given the economics and scheduling of dance companies and Darmstadt's commitments at home, it may be too much to hope that the company could make an annual trip to Taipei. But there should be a law that Lin and crew have to come back at least every two years.



Above: *New Yorker* theater critic Hilton Als has compared the lone black role in the hit Broadway play *A Behanding in Spokane*, played by Anthony Mackie, right, to the racist caricatures of black Americans that populated American cinema in the 1920s and 1930s.

Left: Christopher Walken has received rave reviews for his portrayal of an openly racist character in *A Behanding in Spokane*.

## Broadway rocked by racism claims

A prominent New York critic has divided US theatergoers with a furious assault on Irish writer Martin McDonagh's hit new play

BY PAUL HARRIS AND VANESSA THORPE  
THE OBSERVER, NEW YORK AND LONDON

Controversial playwright Martin McDonagh is used to creating headlines in Britain and Ireland with his dark tales laced with black humor and flowing with stage blood.

So his attempt to crack the American market with his first play set in the US has caused an understandable stir on Broadway, where Christopher Walken has been persuaded to play the lead role. But trying out an American setting as opposed to an Irish one is proving a challenging exercise.

The play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, has a typically bleak and violent McDonagh premise: An aging killer, played by Walken, is looking for a severed hand that he lost many years ago, then he meets a couple of con artists in a dingy hotel room who tell him they have the precious appendage.

Some reviewers have judged that McDonagh — whose other plays include *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Pillowman* and who also directed and wrote the hit film *In Bruges*, starring Colin Farrell — fails to understand the American psyche as well as he does that of his fellow Irishmen. "He seems to have lost his hitherto unerring sense of direction in the

busy, open country of the United States," wrote Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*. *USA Today* called it: "... hardly McDonagh's most fully realized effort."

Then there was the *New Yorker*. In an extraordinary and withering review, the magazine's theater critic, Hilton Als, laid into the play for being overtly racist. "I don't know a single self-respecting black actor who wouldn't feel shame and fury while sitting through Martin McDonagh's new play," began Als' review, which is probably one of the most negative pieces of theater criticism produced by the magazine in recent years.

Als, who is black, took umbrage at the play's use of racist insults by Walken's character, who is openly and proudly prejudiced. "A *Behanding* ... isn't in the least palatable; it's vile, particularly in its repeated use of the word 'nigger,'" Als wrote. He then went on to compare the play's lone black role, Toby — played by Anthony Mackie, the star of *The Hurt Locker*, to the racist caricatures of black Americans that populated American cinema in the 1920s and 1930s. "The caricature he [McDonagh] presents in

Toby, the young black male, as a shucking, jiving thief can't be excused," he wrote, before lamenting that he believed that Mackie and other black actors have to take such roles in order to get higher-profile work. "The sad fact is that, in order to cross over, most black actors of Mackie's generation must act black before they're allowed to act human," Als wrote.

Als appears to be the only major critic who reacted to the play's racial themes so viscerally. Few other reviews paid its use of racist language much attention, instead focusing on Walken's performance, which has been widely praised amid early whispers of Tony awards. But Als' remarks certainly hit home with the play's British producer, Robert Fox. "It was absolutely vindictive. Although Hilton Als' comments are meaningless in the scheme of things, because the show is doing very well, I think his remarks were entirely inappropriate and irresponsible," Fox told the *Observer*.

Fox said he thought Als' criticism was in itself an injection of racism where none was merited. "It was racist in that it was racially intolerant to write those things. He doesn't identify himself [in the review] as

a black writer. I think it is extraordinary. I know people who have written to the *New Yorker* about it already. It is completely out of order," Fox said.

Als did not reply to e-mails or an interview request from the *Observer*. Nor did the theater or Mackie have an official reaction. "We have no comment, nor does Anthony Mackie," said a spokeswoman for the production.

Some Broadway experts, however, agreed that, while the work does contain racially provocative material, it is unlikely to cause widespread offense, especially with audiences there to see Walken. "I can understand why an African American may approach the play with a little reticence, but I don't think that is McDonagh's intent," said Dan Bacalzo, managing editor of Theatermania, a top New York theater Web site.

Bacalzo defended McDonagh's right to put racist language in the mouths of one of his characters as he tries to take on American themes. "For Americans race is more important than class, so the material is appropriate for him to tackle when dealing with America," he added.

### TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

MARCH 5 TO MARCH 11



1 Show Luo (羅志祥) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **29.94** percent of sales

2 JJ Lam (林俊傑) and *100 Days* (100天) with **7.33%**

3 Various artists and *Monga* — Original Soundtrack (怪獸電影原聲帶) with **6.47%**

4 Ah Du (阿杜 aka 杜成義) and *Nothing to Fear* (沒什麼好怕) with **5.66%**

5 Julia Peng (彭佳慧) and *What Women Say* (因為女人說) with **4.96%**

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## PLANET POP



*South Park* will poke fun at Tiger Woods in its season opener this week.

PHOTO: AP

Tiger Woods, whose marital infidelity led to a firestorm of scandal, will be featured in this week's season-opening episode of the Comedy Central animated television show *South Park*.

A teaser clip with the label "All The Temptations" promoting Wednesday's first show of *South Park*'s 14th season has already been viewed by more than 62,000 people according to a counter on the network's Web site.

In the selection, an animated Woods stands at a podium much as the real one did last month in Florida when he made a public apology, speaking about how he felt he could get away with anything and deserved to enjoy "all the temptations around me."

Only at the end of the clip does the scene expand to show Eric Cartman, one of *South Park*'s main characters, standing behind the cartoon Woods and looking up at him as he speaks.

The real Woods has taken an indefinite break from golf to work on his personal life in the wake of a scandal that saw more than a dozen women claim to have had affairs with the world's number one golfer.

Rod Blagojevich has already lost one job. Now the disgraced former governor of Illinois is hoping to avoid the words "You're fired!" as he fights for his favorite charity, and his reputation, on the TV show *Celebrity Apprentice*. Blagojevich, who was impeached

and removed from office, is awaiting trial later this year on charges of corruption and allegations that he tried to sell US President Barack Obama's former Senate seat.

But he says he decided to compete in NBC's TV show *Celebrity Apprentice* because he has been "maliciously wronged" and is publicly fighting back.

Billionaire property mogul and *Apprentice* host Donald Trump was impressed. "Governor. You have a hell

of a lot of guts," Trump told Blagojevich in yesterday's season premiere.

"It took a lot of courage, under the pressure that he is under, for him to even do the show," Trump said later. "I've known people, where they have had problems like he has got, that go into a corner and shoot themselves, or just hide."

"He was highly competitive, he really worked very hard. He did a very good job," Trump added.

Blagojevich joins 13 other celebrities including singer Cyndi Lauper, British reality show judge Sharon Osbourne, Poison rock band singer Bret Michaels, former baseball player Darryl Strawberry and Victoria Secret's model Selita Banks who carry out business-oriented, women vs men and team tasks in New York.

Each celebrity is competing for a charity of his or her choice. Blagojevich is playing on behalf of the Children's Cancer Center of Tampa.

In the first episode, the former governor takes numerous opportunities to proclaim his innocence as the teams are challenged to run a diner for a day.

"It is just another form of public service," Blagojevich says of his assignment as a waiter for the diner challenge. "I didn't do those things, by the way," he tells one customer while delivering his food.

Michaels described the former governor as "fantastic."

"I found him extremely nice. I thought he was down to earth. Every time we had to do anything together he was focused, and he is great at delegating. I think he embraced stuff and he was not scared to get his hands dirty," the Poison frontman said.

Trump said Blagojevich's time gets "pretty wild" but declined to say how long he lasts on the show, which ends each week with one contestant being told the now famous words "You're fired!"

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has done it. So has genome pioneer Craig Venter.

And now American film actress Glenn Close has joined a handful of celebrities to have their genome sequenced in the name of science.

Close, who stars in the FX television series *Damages* and is known for movie roles including *Fatal Attraction* and *Dangerous Liaisons*, said the offer was too good to pass up.

"For me, anything that can move the science forward is worthwhile," Close said. "It's pretty well publicized that I have mental health issues in my family."

Close, whose family illnesses include bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, is a founder of the nonprofit group BringChange2Mind, which raises awareness about mental illness.

New sequencing technologies through companies like Illumina of San Diego, which did Close's genome, have vastly reduced the cost of producing an entire map of the human genome.

Whereas the first human genome cost US\$3 billion and took more than a decade to produce, Illumina charges US\$48,000 for the kind of sequencing Close got.

Scientists say even newer technology will bring the price down to US\$1,000 within five years, essentially less than the cost of an advanced type of X-ray called a CT scan.

— AGENCIES