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John Malkovich during a reading for the Steppenwolf Theater Company's dramatization of Don DeLillo's novel "Libra."

As a Stage Director, John Malkovich Is True to His Image

By MEL GUSSOW

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CHICAGO — As an actor, John Malkovich repeatedly transforms himself. In his words, he can "go into other people's skins." These people happen to include some of the strangest, most obsessive characters in movies and theater: the volcanic Pale in Lanford Wilson's play "Burn This" and, last summer, the killer in Clint Eastwood's film "In the Line of Fire." In his next movie, Stephen Frears's "Mary Reilly," to be filmed this summer in England, he will face the doubly daunting task of playing Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (opposite Julia Roberts in the title role as the housemaid).

Preserving the prevailing Malkovich image, his current theatrical work — as director and, for the first time, as adapter — is a dramatization of "Libra," Don DeLillo's award-winning novel about Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The production is at the Steppenwolf Theater Company, the theater that originally nurtured the talents of Mr. Malkovich and his friends.

"Libra" has fascinated Mr. Malko-

vich since he read it, before it was published in 1988. "It addressed in a very striking way how it was that the system doesn't work," he said, "how we churn out people like Oswald." As for the assassination: "It's the story that won't go away. DeLillo refers to it in the novel as the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century. That's not hyperbole. To me it was the beginning of nihilism — a huge psychic disturbance."

Through the years, Mr. Malkovich has acquired a reputation for playing outsiders on the edge of violence. From his point of view, that "says more about my capabilities, or about how I'm perceived, than about my interests."

"It has more to do with people feeling that I could go either way," the thought that in real life he could become like his demonic characters.

Clearly there is something about those characters, and about Oswald, that strikes a reflexive chord. He attributes it partly to the fact that he is nonjudgmental about roles and "quite ready to understand how someone in a totally different position sees the world." And of course he has to make his choices from what is

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made available to him. "People don't say, 'Hey, why don't you do *Sleepless in Seattle*?'"

For Mr. Malkovich, who was in residence in Chicago this month with his companion, Nicole Peyra, and their two children, "Libra" represents a homecoming and a reunion. Along with Mr. Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, Gary Sinise, Terry Kinney, Glenn Headly (Mr. Malkovich's former wife), Kevin Anderson, Joan Allen, John Mahoney and others have emerged from the ensemble, and they have remained an extended theatrical family. Between movie and other stage assignments, many of them return to work at Steppenwolf.

For several years, the company has been in its new modern home, with a wide proscenium stage and a studio theater, a distinct change from the early shoestring days when the troupe moved nomadically around Chicago. Today, with international success, Steppenwolf continues to provide an alternative, and sometimes a pipeline, to Broadway. If "Libra" works, then Mr. Malkovich and his co-producers will think about presenting it in London or New York.

The opening-night reviews praised Mr. Malkovich's staging and Ms. Metcalf's performance while expressing reservations about the play. Hedy Weiss of *The Chicago Sun-Times* said it was an "intriguing, ambitious, but not entirely satisfying intellectual vaudeville.")

Normal Conspirators

Sitting in the theater several weeks ago, with a knitted skullcap covering his receding hairline and making him look almost Asian, he is rehearsing his actors at the same time he is reshaping the play. In his hands is his text: a dogeared paperback copy of "Libra" with a makeshift cover on which the author has written the title. The book has been thickly indexed by the adapter.

Trying to capture the crisscrossing density of the novel, he has extracted DeLillo dialogue and also written his own material, putting scenes in and slashing them out. "I read the book over and over and tried to extrapolate

the story." Mr. Malkovich said. As he saw it, "The main thread is Oswald and his relationship with his mother." He also asked himself: "If there were a conspiracy to kill the President, what shape would it take? It's not the silly shape of movies and fiction with steely-eyed men. They're sort of normal people, which I thought Don did wonderfully in the book."

During several trips to Chicago, Mr. DeLillo became Mr. Malkovich's resident expert. "John has his own attack," Mr. DeLillo said. "He wants to create a stage space in which the novel can reinvent itself. The play comes at you with lots of texture and with a level of irreverence that is advantageous."

At one point, Mr. Malkovich considered directing "Libra" as a movie, but he decided it was better suited to the stage. Stylistically, the attempt is

Success brings a nomad back to Steppenwolf.

presentational rather than representational. Nine actors playing dozens of characters sit at banks of microphones and rise to create scenes and in some cases to address the audience directly. As the play moved through rehearsal and then previews, it gathered electronic enhancement: video cameras and monitors, slides and film.

Oswald is played by Alexis Arquette, Oswald's mother by Ms. Metcalf, who also portrays David Ferrie, a bizarre conspirator. In this version, Ferrie acts as a kind of father figure to Oswald. In the Oliver Stone movie, "J.F.K.," he was played by Joe Pesci. Were Mr. Malkovich to portray a character, Ferrie probably would have been his role of choice. As the director worked on the play, Ms. Metcalf's twinned performances as mother and symbolic father became the focus.

"My father was an exceptionally strong influence on me," Mr. Malko-

vich said. "But what if he wasn't? I can see how, given a certain degree of sensitivities, proclivities and rage, I could have ended up differently. I see Oswald as a bright, kind of dyslexic, troubled boy with absolutely no parental help. As Faulkner said, 'the sequence of natural events and their causes, which shadows every man's brow.' How do you end up with the high-powered rifle in your hands and the President passing under your window? And how do you move from that circumstance to pressing the trigger?"

Then he quoted the play's Ferrie, "History is the sum total of all the things they're not telling us." Mr. Malkovich was reminded of a conversation he had with the film director Bernardo Bertolucci when the Berlin wall came down. "He was very, very affected by that," Mr. Malkovich said. "He couldn't understand why I wasn't. He said everything is political. I said, no, actually nothing is. That's the whole problem. Everything is still personal. There are things that run much deeper: dreams, visions, down to the deepest levels of self."

A Conduit to the Actors

To help his actors, he gives them the most specific directorial notes, suggesting, for example, that Ms. Metcalf play Ferrie with a slight speech impediment. For her role as Oswald's mother, he told her that if the audience laughed at her last monologue, she should silence them. As he explained: "It's fine if they laugh. It's probably preferable." But her character shouldn't allow it. Looking back on her long Steppenwolf collaboration with Mr. Malkovich, Ms. Metcalf said his notes "are by far the most creative of any director. I've ever worked with."

As a director, he considers himself "a receiver" who "conducts" the actors and "waits for the idea to hit." When Mr. Malkovich acts, he always gives himself the same note: "Follow my instinct. Follow the yellow brick road." He added that he thought of himself as "among the hardest-working actors," someone who is relen-

less in his search for a character. Did he learn anything from Mr. Eastwood as a director? "In a way," he replied, "but not necessarily from working with him, which I loved. From watching him as an actor. He's a great minimalist. He's not a big talker. Clint, let's face it."

Increasingly, Mr. Malkovich, now 40, is taking more control of his career decisions. He and Russ Smith, one of his oldest Steppenwolf friends, have a production company with several projects lined up after "Libra," including a movie thriller called "Forget Me Not," in which Mr. Malkovich would play a burned-out detective, and a film about Howard Hughes.

In June, he is to begin work on "Mary Reilly," which will unite members of the "Dangerous Liaisons" team, including Mr. Freats, Christopher Hampton as the screenwriter and Glenn Close in a cameo role. Jekyll and Hyde should offer him a rich environment for split-persona acting. About his Hyde to come, he said with a devilish smile: "He's pretty barbaric and lethal. They said I was the only one mean enough to play the part."

Tucker Foundation Awards Music Grants

The Richard Tucker Music Foundation has awarded its 1994 Career Grants of \$6,500 each to Marie Platte, a soprano, Kim Josephson and Earle Patriarco, baritone, and Steven Condy, a bass-baritone. In addition, four Robert M. Jacobson Study Grants of \$5,000 each are to go to Christine Goerke, a soprano, Laura Tucker (no relation to Richard Tucker), a mezzo-soprano; Richard Clement, a tenor, and John Packard, a baritone.

The foundation, named for the American tenor, who died in 1975, provides cash prizes and study grants to American professional singers on the verge of international careers. This year's Richard Tucker Award of \$30,000 went to the soprano Jennifer Larmore.