

Alma Matter(s)

Monday, October 11, 2004 - review by Sergio Martinez, Socal.com Editor

"The individual doesn't exist... we're all assemblages of multiplicities..."
Delleuz and Guattari paraphrased



The labyrinth that is Art...

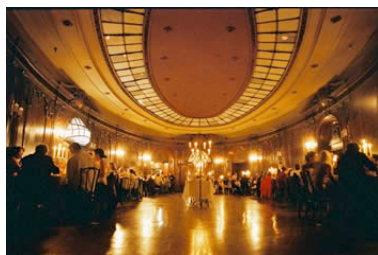
Inside the mind of the artist, Art is an endless territory and getting lost there is one of the best ways to find. Intuition also reveals this: Art's geography is not the same thing as the map. Art then, qualifies as a labyrinth and the ultimate maze is one with no discernible way in or out.

Can you stand not being in control? Are you bold enough to keep your pace in the dark?

In LA, with few notable exceptions, we're used to Vanilla theater acts. The inhabitants of this city, home to the world of film entertainment, don't often have as entertainment options, challenging mind-benders. We like our spectacles to obey the rules of museum tours: someone holds our hand, points to the beginning, middle and end. God forbid we get confused (isn't that why we're so fond of remote controls and rewinding DVD players and VCR's?)

Besides, movie rentals are only 2 to 3 bucks. What do you mean \$125 dollars to go and see a play... what the hell is going on? If you have the cash, don't even think it twice: pay for the ticket, immerse yourself in this ambitious play. Or to say it more suggestively, go and be lost in another time.

Welcome to Alma.

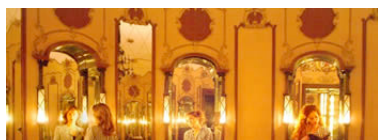


Or to steal Mexican poet Octavio Paz' famous book title: welcome to The Labyrinth of Solitude. After all, aren't love affairs the most common route we embark on in order to avoid loneliness, that recurring possibility we all dread throughout our lives?

Alma is Spanish for Soul. And soul is what characterizes this one-of-a-kind poly-drama based on the tumultuous life of one this century's foremost femme fatales: Alma Mahler-Gropius-Werfel, wife to composer Gustav Mahler, Jewish poet Franz Werfel and Bauhaus architect, Walter Gropius. And these XX century luminaries are just a few members in a partial list of her loves. No wonder the complete title of this play is: Alma, Widow of the 4 Arts.

Ad to the above list, painters Oskar Kokoshka and Gustav Klimt, musicians and composers Arnold Schoenberg, Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Richard Strauss and Igor Stravinsky, novelists Thomas Mann and Thornton Wilder, actors Errol Flynn and Jennifer Jones and actor and entertainer Danny Kaye and you start getting an idea of the kind of company she surrounded herself with.

Put it in the bank



Marquee names aside, the strength of this play doesn't derive from the recognizable names of the men in Alma's life. This play stands out for a different reason: having been a successful European production since 1996, Alma is the boldest play to hit LA



in a long, long time.

The reason, you may ask?

Alma is one of the finest examples of Antonin Artaud's most ambitious plans for truly avant-garde Theater: the complete abolishment of the typical lines that divide audience from actors, performers from spectators. In this play, you're a viewer and a scene fixture, background audience and set decoration. While you partake of the exquisite dinner surrounded by all the actors and you toast Mahler's death, you actually co-act. If you're dressed in gala gowns you may suffer a pleasant surprise: you might be confused by other spectators as being part of the plot (like my own companion did, herself a black suited femme fatale). And should this accident occur, you should enjoy it: you are indeed part of this extravagance.

Wanna swim with sharks?

Consider:

You'll attend Mahler's funeral and a dinner on his honor. You'll ride a period bus around downtown LA and watch some of the actors recreate a scene in a back alley a few blocks away from the Los Angeles Theatre (the play's venue). You'll be escorted outdoors and witness a departing train, with fog, whistles and all. In this play, you are your own camera lens so you follow those actors or scenes that appeal to your eye. There are about 50 different scenes and about 14 actors, many scenes unfolding simultaneously throughout the venue... and to your dismay, you can't follow them all and neither can you catch up.



The pace of the play is frantic, intimate and ultimately dizzying all wrapped into one. As you move in and out of period decorated rooms, you'll bump into many incarnations of Alma running wild through different sets scattered throughout the theater (there are 4 actresses portraying her during the play's 4 hour long performance).

You'll witness intimate acts where a few actors hold your attention undivided, while your ears can't help it but notice that someone just shouted and broke a glass in the set next door. Your original shyness getting in and out of the different sets will be long gone by the time the first intermission arrives. You'll feel like Poirot, chasing leads in every room of the sumptuous theatre before someone erases all traces of evidence left behind.

The actors working in this masterpiece all step up to the plate and put this town full of actors in guard: with or without you as an spectator, with one or one hundred witnesses around, their lines of dialogue and their acting goes on unbound, unflinching, unstopped. And to watch them hold their ground regardless of the number of people watching them is nothing short of remarkable. Their acting nothing but the equivalent of the vaccination we all need to remember how to stand in awe of the stage actor's craft. No wonder big screen legend John Malkovich has never forsaken theatre and currently lives and France.



A is for Europeans, Z is for Art...

The guts and inspiration for this play, begin right at the top: Viennese Producer Paulus Manker is also the play's director, oh, and one of its actors, not to mention a food server and an assistant to the valet parking employees. He's there to greet you at the theater's entrance, and after serving food, he performs in the last act. When it's all done, fake blood and bandages around his head, he's one of the last men standing in the almost deserted

lobby when only worn-out actors and press representatives are hanging still around.



Mr. Manker is not just the most multifaceted director I've ever seen. He's been the original producer and director since the play's inception and debut in Vienna in 1996. There, the play was originally scheduled for 15 'experimental' performances but given its resounding success, it remained as a Vienna staple for the next 6 years.

Not content with such an illustrious stay as one of the most successful European plays, Manker decided to push this edgy piece, slightly further: how about making an international tour that followed the most important world metropolis where Alma and her lovers lived? Once the idea started, there was no going back: after Vienna (Alma's home town), the play moved to Venice where it was played in a restored palazzo and then on to Lisbon, where the setting was a XVII Century monastery with city views all around. After successful seasons in these European cities, the next stop was a logical deduction: Los Angeles, where Alma moved with her then husband, Franz Werfel while his famous novel, *The Song of Bernadette*, was being turned into an Oscar winning movie in 1943.

If the play continues to receive the acclaim and more importantly, the support it deserves, the tour will culminate in New York City, the last place Alma Mahler-Werfel-Gropius lived before she passed away in 1964.

I am trapped...



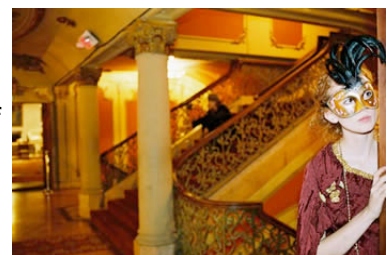
As a reviewer, to do justice to this play, one would have to go back six or seven times and attempt to follow different actors around. Or to request passes for our entire journalistic staff and send all 7 or 8 like hound dogs chasing a different rabbit. Even then, a comprehensive review may be not just impossible but actually, it may just defeat the play's purpose. As I spoke with producer Manker at the end of the play, he insisted both him and playwright Sobol intended the play's experience to mimic Internet

browsing: you never know after landing on a website's front page, where will the Internet surfer move to next. Unlike linear newspapers and theatre, this "internet inspired play" revolts against this very linearity. You make up your sequence of scenes, you decide which actors to follow, you choose your own Alma and all the rest, you discard.

Highlights of this grand production are their period sets. As you wonder around the theater's many nooks and crevices, you'll be hardpressed not to rub your eyes: the realism recreated there is almost unfathomable. Only Hollywood and hundreds of editing hours could surpass this overarching set design: every alcove is decorated with period furniture, newspapers, music scores, medical and beautifying paraphernalia. Nothing is left to chance: the camel haired foaming brushes in the porcelain bath tubs of the many men in Alma's life, her luggage and dresses, books and then-current news gazettes or newspapers. Old rim glasses, authentic begin-of-the-century wheelchairs, benches and divans.

Even the candles in stage resembled the ones used in those days (overly fat and yellowish dripping candles sitting behind glass lanterns or atop wax-caked silver chandeliers. The theater even smelled as if the air inside it had remained trapped there since 1931.

Oh, by the way, the actors in the play are nothing short of gripping: mostly stage actors, their sonorous voices and stage presence will give them up. And all four Almas, man, they rock, (one, pretending to be her 125 years old ghost, the others, portraying her at different stages of her life.)

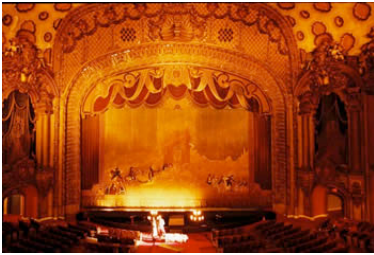


The Actors

Alma Mahler at 125 years of age is played by Flo Lawrence. Ryan Templeton, Tiffany Elle and Maria Vargo play the younger Almas throughout. Magnus Stefansson plays Gustav Mahler, Hans Hoffman plays Walter Gropius with director Paulus Manker portraying Oskar Kokoschka and Anthony St. Martin playing poet Franz Werfel. Also, Ruben Garcia plays composer Alexander Zemlinsky, Robert Branco plays the role of painter Gustav Klimt while Morton Lewis is Max Burckhard.

In several risky scenes, Bernadette Perez plays gutsy Teresa, the chamber-maid while Maria Vargo is Anna Mahler, Gustav's daughter and Lucie Pohl portrays Manon Gropius, the architect's daughter. Some actors also play double characters throughout the polidrama: Flow Lawrence besides portraying the 125 year old Alma ghost also portrays Anna Moll. Actor Morton Lewis acts both as Burckhard as well as Freud.

If the 4 hour long span scares you, don't fret: these are some of the most delightful 4 hours you'll have the chance to spend in your life. There's no time for boredom, although plenty of opportunities to feel disoriented and numbed. You won't feel nor the beginning nor realize how close you are to the end. The play begins with all the night's attendants as they socialize and drink in the Baroque Lobby. Suddenly, you realized a good portion of the guests around you are actually stage actors, all ready to start their acts.



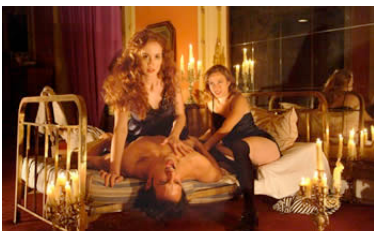
Music is exquisite and it's all taken from Gustav Mahler's life long repertoire. Joshua Sobol's writing is elegant: replicating conversational dialogue intertwined with intense drama is no small feat to overcome. And the sets, oh, what a glorious experiment in recreating an epoch with such overwhelming detail and knack. No building in this entire city could come closer than the Los Angeles Theater as a worthy venue for this amazing play. The performance I was invited to was also attended by the grandson of the architect who originally built it back in 1931. The theater was a posh venue of that era and for its grand opening, Albert Einstein and Charlie Chaplin among other celebrities of the time, were invited to preview Chaplin's film: "City Lights".

Are you crazy?

You may still wonder: how does anyone other than celebrities, stock brokers and wealthy socialites manage to scrounge 125 bucks? If you take the girlfriend or boyfriend it's already 250. Man, I know some people here in LA who pay less for a working car.

Here are a few suggestions: tell your grandma to take you and forsake another ugly sweater when next Christmas comes around. Tell your dad to stop giving you re-releases of CD's you already own of your least favorite rock bands. Tell your rich aunt that this is really important for your art education and have her withdraw from your college account. Oh, for god's sake, file early for your income taxes and if you must, cheat just a little Uncle Sam. And please, don't mention no one I told you this or I'll suffer Alma's fate while running away from the Nazis: flight after flight after flight...

Credits



Other important credits worth mentioning besides the actors, director and playwright are: the stunning set design by Georg Resetschnig. Max Wohlkonig and Benno Wand for Costumes. Andreas Buchele for sound. Roger Mathey and Mark Bate for Stage managing, Heike Vieweger and Beatrix Erber in charge of props and costumes. Sabine Pribil and Helmut Kulhanek in charge of infrastructure. The dramaturgy is from Elisabeth Wager.



There are still many others behind the night's menu and on-site cooking plus stage and production supervisors. Only when you realize the logistics behind this ambitious project, you understand why the cost at the door, why the length, why the chosen venue, why the layout and why the expensive props shipped from across the ocean just for this production.

It becomes obvious that this is a labor of love, (in part, possible thanks to support from several Austrian government art agencies as well as other corporate sponsors). It is also a testament to the artistic collaboration of Paulus Manker and Joshua Sobol, two incredibly talented artists, one as an actor and overall producer, the other as an incisive writer able to orchestrate ambitious theater projects.

So come on, go for it and feel cultured in this mostly vanilla town.

And if you're still struggling with the ticket's price, just imagine yourself inviting the whole office a drink at the local bar next Friday night, except, don't do it and instead save the cash. You've got until December 5 to check this jewel of a piece out.

As stated in the intro to this article elsewhere in this site, this masterpiece can be summarized in two words: A-mazing



Just the facts:

Alma is playing now until December 5th at the Los Angeles Theatre (615 S. Broadway, Downtown LA, between 6th and 7th). Performances: Thursday through Saturday at 7 pm. Sunday's performance is at 6 pm. For tickets and reservations as well as group discounts, call 213.688.2994 or visit the play's website: www.alma-mahler.com

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