

THEATER

Is He Mellow? Ask the Guy Missing a Hand

By JASON ZINOMAN

FOUR years ago Martin McDonagh, the celebrated playwright whose flamboyantly gruesome dark comedies have brought smashed skulls, child murder and other carefully calibrated outrages to Broadway, shocked the theater world in an entirely new way.

At the height of his creative powers and popularity, he decided to quit the stage while he was on top. Explaining that he was repeating himself and needed to do some growing up, he told *The New Yorker*, "I've said enough as a young dramatist." He was 35.

His early retirement didn't last long. After writing screenplays and directing his first feature, the cult hit "In Bruges," Mr. McDonagh, who turns 40 this month, has returned with "A Behanding in Spokane," a work he wrote last year that shows no signs of mellowing adulthood.

Running at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater, the politically incorrect thriller follows a racist psychotic played by Christopher Walken who threatens to kill two small-time crooks (Zoe Kazan and Anthony Mackie) unless they returning his missing hand as promised. Reflecting on his show during a recent interview, Mr. McDonagh said with a laugh, "I realize that I am never going to grow up."

In 1994, in less than 10 months, Mr. McDonagh banged out his first seven plays while sequestered in a house in an Irish neighborhood of London. He described their animating theatrical philosophy simply: "Guns. Explosions. Blood." For the next dozen years these entertaining works, from "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (which he wrote in eight days) to his most ambitious drama, "The Pillowman" (written in two and a half weeks), were produced in London and then New York, with the exception of "The Banshees of Inisherin," a portrait of an aging writer with declining skills that Mr. McDonagh wants to revisit when he's older.

When he started working on "Behanding," he said, he intended to recreate his original burst of artistic inspiration but found himself quickly paralyzed. After all, he wasn't some unknown writer anymore. There were expectations to live up to. "So I decided I'm just going to write something trashy," he confessed. "It could be a runt of a story, which it is, in a good way."

Mr. McDonagh began with the image of a man shooting a gun into a closet, where the audience could hear the sound of someone struggling inside: Gun? Check. Explosion? Check. Blood? Probably. Following

The playwright Martin McDonagh, above right, has unretired with "A Behanding in Spokane," featuring, below right, Zoe Kazan, Christopher Walken and Anthony Mackie.

ONLINE: ARCHIVES

Past coverage of the work of Martin McDonagh, including reviews and photos: nytimes.com/theater



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this gambit is a series of familiar McDonagh elements: airborne body parts, unexpectedly sensitive killers and a propulsive, outlandish plot. And once he finished a draft, he realized that he couldn't just stick it in a drawer. "I was going to do a Salinger and disappear," he said. "Then I thought, I want to have some fun."

Sitting in the theater district restaurant Angus McIndoe, Mr. McDonagh appeared boyishly handsome with a can't-help-myself grin that accompanies the most recklessly candid sense of humor to be found in a Broadway playwright. After a few drinks he mused merrily about what would happen if the elderly woman sitting at a nearby table pulled out a firearm and started shooting. If this reporter was killed, he

After a break, Martin McDonagh returns to Broadway and playwriting, guns blazing.

said, he would volunteer to finish the article. "He was having fun when his face got shot off" is how his tribute would go.

As for dying, the worst way, he said with the sureness of a man who had given the question serious consideration, is to be tortured to death. The best? Eaten by a lion. Wouldn't that actually involve terrible pain and suffering? "Sure, at the time," he said matter-of-factly. "Fifty years down the line

it would be amazing, especially for a playwright. They would always remember you."

Mr. McDonagh said that working in film had made him more ruthless in editing ("A Behanding" is 90 minutes) and increasingly determined to show, not tell. "There's nothing that you can't show onstage," he said.

"Movies do that, they tell you," he added, shaking his head. "Why can't you do

that? Just stop being so lazy. What century is this?"

He is also dreaming of America more than ever, in his work and life. He has little positive to say about his home city, London, which he calls "the rudest place." As for its theater scene, putting it in the context of soccer, he compares the British stage to "Greek second division." In his formulation, New York is the World Cup.

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With Turturro, Italy Knows No Bounds

By FRANZ LIDZ

MILAN

FROM a stony redoubt on a stage in the Piccolo Teatro Strehler, John Turturro smiles faintly and presses the palms of his hands together between his knees. Mr. Turturro — born in Queens, living in Brooklyn — is playing an unscrupulous innkeeper in "Fiabe italiane" ("Italian Folk Tales"), a powerfully imagined parable he also directs and has freely adapted from fables collected by Italo Calvino, Giambattista Basile and Giuseppe Pitre.

Mr. Turturro studies a fool (Max Casella) who has just arrived at the inn with a magical donkey. The fool asks him to give the beast food and fresh water and cautions him not to say "ass dump" in its presence.

Though the innkeeper instructs his wife not to utter the phrase, she blurts it out anyway, causing the donkey to bray, raise its tail and shower the ground with jewels.

While unbraiding her for repeating the incantation, the innkeeper repeats it himself. Which prompts a second cascade.

"O.K., everyone!" says the fool, at which point he invokes the magical words. Presto: Another shimmering load.

The donkey dung scene derives from Basile's "Racconto dell'Orco" and "Ari-ari, Ciuco Mio, Butta Danari!" No. 127 of the 200 yarns in Calvino's popular folklore anthology, published in 1956. In the book's introduction, Calvino quotes a Tuscan proverb: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it."

Mr. Turturro, a veteran of dozens of Off Broadway plays and scores of Hollywood movies, added elements that would not be out of place in commedia dell'arte, the ancient Italian improv theater. His production, which last month concluded a sold-out tour of Turin, Naples and Milan, featured minstrels, two overlapping stories, layers of language (English, Italian, Western Lombardian, Sicilian, Neapolitan, Piedmontese, Abruzzese) and characters blissfully free of self-consciousness.

Bathed in a palette of unlikely yet sumptuous color combinations, ogresses posed as lovely maidens, ghouls vanished into enchanted sacks, and princes sprang from giant talking crabs. As often happens in tales of transformation, power is eventually tempered with responsibility, and the cruel realities of existence cede to purity, virtue and rectitude.

"Calvino said that folk tales are a general representation of life," Mr. Turturro, 53, said over plates of osso bucco and risotto Milanese at a trattoria near the Duomo. "I find the economy and beauty of these stories quite irresistible. They're full of



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grace and humility and reflect an Italy without borders, an Italy more of a continent."

Like one of Mr. Turturro's favorite films, Vittorio De Sica's neo-Realist fairy tale "Miracle in Milan" (1951), the stories wed fantasy to the everyday. "They're the naïve tales of peasants trying to make sense of their lives," he said. "They attempt to give hope to those who have none." And despite their age, the fables remain remarkably fresh. "Bernie Madoff — greedy, irresponsible, only out for himself — is an echo of some of the tricksters and deceivers," he said.

Mr. Turturro grows lyrical discussing the "continuous quiver of love" that runs through the stories. He loves Italy with a passion that perhaps only the children of immigrants are capable of. "Many great

Italian authors have never even been translated into English," he lamented. "In the United States being of Italian descent is not a broadening experience. It's narrowing, in that you're rarely exposed to the depth and diversity of Italian culture. American culture is so flattened. I'm not so interested in being made into a pancake anymore."

He is interested in having his production of "Italian Folk Tales" restaged in a New York theater, however. "It would be nice to present this aspect of Italy that isn't seen very often in the states," he said.

The play is just the latest expedition in Mr. Turturro's midlife exploration of his ancestral land. The journey began in 1986 during the filming of "The Sicilian," Michael Cimino's murky meditation on the life of the notorious outlaw Salvatore Giu-

liano. "I had studied Italian for three months," Mr. Turturro recalled, "and when I got to Sicily, I was completely lost."

A half century ago Mr. Giuliano was the subject of a groundbreaking piece of political filmmaking by Francesco Rosi, the acclaimed Neapolitan director. Mr. Rosi was so taken by Mr. Turturro's turn as a throttled playwright in the Coen brothers' "Barton Fink" (1991) that he asked him to play the lead in "La Tregua" ("The Truce").

"The film is ironic and grotesque," Mr. Rosi told him, "and I feel you have both." Six years in the making, "La Tregua" was based on Primo Levi's account of his post-war odyssey back to Turin from Auschwitz.

Mr. Rosi, in turn, gave Mr. Turturro a translation of Eduardo De Filippo's senti-

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From left, Richard Easton, Max Casella, John Turturro, Aida Turturro and Diego Turturro, in "Fiabe Italiane" ("Italian Folk Tales"), on tour last month in Turin, Naples and Milan.

THEATER

The Screen's Now Setting Many a Stage

By ANITA GATES

AT "The Orphans' Home Cycle" titles and dates move across the screen like "Star Wars" credits taking a detour. At "Fela!" newspaper headlines like "Fela Declares Self 'Black Power Man'" pop up on a screen. Even at "Safe Home," a low-budget, bare-bones production that opened Off Broadway this year, scene changes were announced with 1950s newsreel footage.

Lately, it seems, going to the theater is a lot like going to the movies. There's often a screen upstage, and either film footage, photo stills or a combination of the two — collectively known as projections — are part of the show. So much so that the Yale School of Drama is going to offer a full-fledged projection design program starting this fall. Now you can major in it.

Wendall Harrington, the veteran designer who heads the new program at Yale, isn't surprised that projections have become so popular; their use is "expanding exponentially," as the drama school's official announcement noted. "Everybody writing and creating theater now has grown up watching TV," Ms. Harrington said. "So cinema is their language. Motion is their language. Of course we're going to try to express ourselves that way."

In addition to scenic, sound and lighting design, students in the new discipline will study projection engineering, image-creation software and motion graphics, all the better to be well-rounded theater professionals.

Check the credits in your Playbills, and you'll find the title projection designer turning up in all kinds of productions.

Michael Mayer, who is directing "American Idiot," the Green Day musical set to open on Broadway next month, said, "It would be foolish of me and my designers not to embrace video and projection in a really giant way." "American Idiot" is set in 2003, so theatergoers may see, among other things, images of President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" banner and of Britney Spears doing something scandalous.

The projections reflect "a whole generation's response to the media, specifically television," Mr. Mayer said. "We have a culture right now that has us buried in our BlackBerrys and our iPhones and all of our Palm things. Everywhere you look, there's a screen now."

At Studio 54 the creative team of the musical tribute "Sondheim on Sondheim" was at work on a production that will be dominated by images on screen. Some 50 televisions dangled above or lay on a series of steps in general disarray, part of what will become the movable, multipiece set for the show, which begins previews this month.

"The set and the video together have to kind of be Steve onstage," said Beowulf Boritt, the set designer, who describes the show as "a documentary in musical revue form" and considers Stephen Sondheim a virtual character in it.

He and Peter Flaherty, the projection designer, were discussing the show, whose stars include Barbara Cook, Vanessa Williams and Tom Wopat, and the importance of the nonhuman players. "The liveliness of theater is still the reason that theater is theater," Mr. Flaherty said, but, as he acknowledged later, "video has an immense power."

Technology itself is a huge factor in projection design's growth. Some projection has been seen in theater for decades — since "the beginning of electricity," if not longer, Ms. Harrington suggested — but just a few years ago became a lot cheaper and easier to use.

Kevin Cunningham, the artistic director of Three-Legged Dog (a.k.a. 3LD Media



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and Theater Group), a troupe that specializes in the experimental, recalls the Dark Ages. "Back then we were using videotapes," he said. "We had VHS decks and this old clunky switcher matrix." It was 1996.

Today Mr. Cunningham and his team have inexpensive technology like Isadora, involving "24 video projectors, all coordinated," which they used for "Fire Island," a 2008 beach drama at their Greenwich Street studio, and Eyeliner, a high-definition video projection system employed for a 2007 production, "Losing Something."

David Gallo, who with Shawn Sagady created the projection design for the current Broadway musical "Memphis," is ex-

For a TV generation, blurred lines at live shows, as projection becomes a drama school item.

cited about new software called Pandora's Box, which links the computers that separately run the projections and the moving scenery.

But "Memphis," the rock-'n'-roll-and-soul story of a mid-20th-century romance between a white man and a black woman in Tennessee, is a fairly intimate musical, so the decision was made to keep projections subtle. Theatergoers will see scene-enhancing still images like radio dials and microphones, and a blowup of the action onstage when the plot moves to a TV dance show.

"We had to deliberately hold ourselves back," Mr. Gallo said, adding later, "Your



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Projections play a role in "The Orphans' Home Cycle," top, and in "Sondheim on Sondheim," for which Beowulf Boritt, left, is set designer and Peter Flaherty projection designer.

ONLINE: STAGE MOVES

More images of video projections mentioned in this article:

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function is to serve the play. Always."

That can be a challenge because audiences' eyes tend to linger on screens.

"The competition between live actors onstage and the moving image — honestly, personally, it's one of my largest concerns with any design I create," said Elaine J. McCarthy, who was responsible for the projections for the Broadway shows "Spamalot" (inspiring visuals of the Grail, animation she calls "friendly rip-offs of Terry Gilliam's work"), "Wicked" (a witch's terrifying shadow, flying monkeys) and "Assassins."

But sometimes the director wants you to look at the projection and nothing else. In that 2004 revival of "Assassins," for instance, Lee Harvey Oswald (Neil Patrick Harris) was upstage center when he took his rifle, shot and then turned to face the

audience. There, screened on his white T-shirt, was a clip from the Zapruder film of the John F. Kennedy assassination. Joe Mantello, the director, told Ms. McCarthy that he knew from the beginning that he wanted to use that clip.

A few theater people have noted that projection design is being incorporated earlier in the process. "Sometimes they are writing it into their scripts, which I think is a really big mistake," said Ms. Harrington of Yale, because directors don't particularly want to be told how to stage the play.

It's also one of the most flexible aspects of a show. While a set can take months to design and build, a projection or video image can be added, deleted or substituted in the blink of an eye.

If there's one thing that seems to annoy A-list projection and video professionals, it's seeing the projection used as just scenery, although that's how Ms. Harrington got her start.

She recalled working on "They're Playing Our Song," the intimate 1979 musical starring Robert Klein and Lucie Arnaz that had 26 scenes. "There's a scene in the laundromat, and the next scene is on the surface of the Moon," she said. And there was definitely no budget for multiple sets, so they created the laundromat and everything else with projection.

Today, Ms. Harrington said, "what you have to figure out is what is the soul of the piece." But she fears that attitude is being overshadowed by the availability of new, glitzy technology, she said.

"I only hope it will get over a little bit the 'shiny toy' part," she said of the projection-design world. "I'm like waiting for this moment to pass."

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mental comedy "Questi Fantasi." In 2005 Mr. Turturro brought the play — retitled "Souls of Naples" and directed by Roman Paska — to New York and Naples. He has since written a screenplay and is on track to direct and act in an English-language feature, which is being produced by Domenico Procacci, who also produced "Gomorra."

Mr. Turturro is in the midst of editing "Passione," a documentary on Neapolitan song that's reminiscent of "Buena Vista Social Club." He calls the movie an endless jukebox of past and present-day musicians.

Last September another documentary he appears in and helped produce, "Rehearsal for a Sicilian Tragedy," had its premiere at the Venice Film Festival. "Rehearsal," also directed by Mr. Paska, is a Pirandello-esque film within a film that examines the island's rich history of puppetry, ponders the Sicilian preoccupation with death and follows Mr. Turturro to the home of his maternal grandmother in Aragona. At the convent across the street he launches into an impromptu duet with a nun, who like his father, who died in 1988, is from the Apulia region of southeastern Italy.

He remembers his parents, Katherine and Nicholas, as splendid raconteurs with a fund of stories that seemed bottomless and memories that seemed infinite. "My mother was dry and precise and could hold your attention for hours with details that were sometimes shocking, sometimes funny," he said. "My father liked to exaggerate and embellish and push an anecdote to its limits. He never told jokes. He didn't like jokes. I don't, either. I prefer revealing stories that make me laugh."

"Italian Folk Tales" has amused him since 1981, when he was given a copy by his future wife, Katherine Borowitz. They

had met at Yale Drama School, and the book was her first gift to him. The inscription: "For John. To adapt or just to read. Kathie."

In 2007 Mr. Turturro, trolling for a play to mount in Naples, was encouraged by Ms. Borowitz to rework the classic tales. They collaborated on the script with Mr. Casella and Carl Capotorto, the author of the recent memoir "Twisted Head." (Mr. Turturro later learned that in the early 1980s, Mr. Calvino and fellow fabulist Federico Fellini had talked about distilling the

An actor unleashes his love for his parents' homeland, especially its folklore, onstage.

fables into a film about prophetic dreams. Alas, Mr. Calvino died in 1985 and the project never got off the ground.)

To stage "Italian Folk Tales," Mr. Turturro enlisted the aid of the Teatro Stabile di Torino and obtained the permission of Mr. Calvino's widow, Chiquita. As it turned out, Ms. Calvino, a genial and youthful octogenarian, had loved his comic turn as a pedophile bowler in "The Big Lebowski." Casting was a family affair: among the American actors in the troupe, Ms. Borowitz, the couple's 9-year-old son Diego and Mr. Turturro's cousin Aida Turturro all juggled multiple roles.

One of Mr. Turturro's biggest technical questions involved the magical donkey. Dare he trust a mechanical one? Fortunately a crew member from Sicily who had grown up with mules volunteered to wear a donkey suit. And rather than raining actual jewels on the set, Mr. Turturro opted for a beam of green flickering light. "It's cool," told young Diego. "But you have to use your imagination."



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Aida Turturro and John Turturro, who adapted "Fiabe Italiane" from various fables. "I find the economy and beauty of these stories quite irresistible," he said.