

Stage veteran married to life of theater



By Andrea Christensen
Staff Reporter

Life on the road can be tiring, unnerving and anything but glamorous. But stage veteran Liliane Montevecchi, who stars in the touring production of "Grand Hotel" coming to the Lied Center for Performing Arts this weekend, said the benefits of performing outweighed the costs.

"I have dedicated my life to theater," Montevecchi said. "I never married. I am married to my art. I live to go on stage every night. Because of this, I can't drink all day. I can't eat everything I'd like to. But this is my choice and I like it."

Montevecchi, who plays the role of the glamorous but melancholy ballerina Grushinskaya, said she thought she was in Nebraska about 30 years ago and had a vague recollection about performing in a state that had "a lot of cows and things." Nevertheless, she said she was looking forward to returning.

Touring with "Grand Hotel," which Montevecchi has done continually since November, allows her to see America and acquaint herself with audiences all over the country, she said.

But the tour has forced her to alter her usually glamorous wardrobe.

"I started with an enormous armoire and seven or eight suitcases," Montevecchi said. "Now I'm down to two. In New York, every day I changed clothes. I just loved to dress up. After one year of touring, I realized I don't need as many clothes."

"Also, I used to wear enormous hats," she said. "On tour they got crushed, so now I wear berets."

Despite the wardrobe hazards, Montevecchi said she believed more Broadway actors should tour with their shows.

"The tour brings Broadway to those who can't afford to come to New York," Montevecchi said. "I think everyone should tour. Too many actors prefer to stay comfortable in New

York when they should be coming to the people."

In the musical, Montevecchi's character wonders if she is getting too old to dance. She also falls in love with the much younger Baron Felix Von Gaigern.

"I based the character partly on my own experience," Montevecchi said. "I was a ballerina when I was young, and now I am playing a ballerina when I am older. In a way, it completes the circle. Also, like Grushinskaya, I am always falling in love with younger men."

Montevecchi said she did not try to imitate Greta Garbo's portrayal of Grushinskaya in the classic film version of "Grand Hotel."

"I never thought of it," Montevecchi said. "I heard that Garbo attended one of my performances, but I didn't know that until afterward. If I had known she was there, I wouldn't have been nervous. After all, this is a musical. It's really a very different part than the one she played."

Playing Grushinskaya is enjoyable, she said, because she doesn't have to pretend to be younger than she is. She also said she thought it stretched her dramatic talent. That talent was stretched to the breaking point when she tried to develop a Russian accent for the part.

"It was horrible," Montevecchi recalled. "I had a teacher who worked with me two hours a day, but I could not learn a Russian accent on top of my French accent. It was a catastrophe."

"Grand Hotel" director and choreographer Tommy Tune decided that because ballerinas from all countries adopted Russian stage names in the '20s, it was possible Grushinskaya could have been French. So he allowed Montevecchi to play the part with her natural French accent.

Montevecchi was born in Paris to a French mother and an Italian father, but she won't reveal what year. By 18, she was a prima ballerina with Roland Petit's ballet company. Soon after, she signed a seven-year contract with MGM and worked in such films as "Daddy Long Legs" with Fred Astaire and "King Creole" with Elvis Presley.

"I was not ready for Hollywood when I was at MGM," Montevecchi said. "I was too young and too excited by all these people I was seeing."

The majority of Montevecchi's career was spent on stage with the Folies Bergere and in Broadway musicals. She won a Tony Award

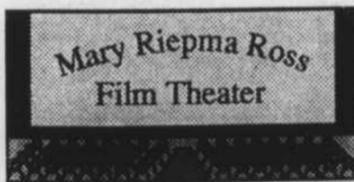


Courtesy of The Jaksina Company, Inc.

Liliane Montevecchi stars as the glamorous ballerina Grushinskaya in the touring production of "Grand Hotel." Performances are this weekend at the Lied Center for Performing Arts.

See MONTEVECCHI on 10

Marks mull merit, message of Spanish movies



By Mark Baldridge
Senior Reporter and
Mark Nemeth
Staff Reporter

Nemeth: So Franco's dead. Baldridge: You mean the horrific dictator of Spain? Admirer of Hitler and Mussolini? The repressive, fascist, tyrannical, maniacal, moustached military man of violence who died in

1975?

N: Oh man, don't you feel pretentious saying stuff like that?

B: Yeah, but we're reviewers.

N: I know, I hate myself.

B: Not as badly as the Spanish artistic community hated the censorship and cultural repression under Franco's rule. When he died, arts exploded, as can be seen in the plethora of contemporary Spanish films in the series "Post Franco: New Spanish Cinema" showing at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater.

N: Fourteen films by eight different directors?

B: Right. They play at a variety of times through Feb. 29.

N: So what did you think of the ones you saw?

B: "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" (Pedro Almodozar) was mediocre.

N: Really? Someone told me he really liked it. It's a comedy, right?

B: Yes, but it was simplistic and the ending didn't make sense.

N: O.K. But what's it about?

B: It's about a man recently released from a mental hospital. He's an interesting character — a cross between an innocent boy and a psychopath. Upon his release, he kidnaps the woman he loves and is abusive to her. By the end of the film, the woman has fallen in love with him for no apparent reason.

N: Is there a bizarre psychological relationship between them that could explain her becoming attached to him? Maybe she becomes psychologically

dependent upon his abuse.

B: Not dependent, exactly. But they definitely develop some type of psychological bonding from the experience. It's a little like the Stockholm syndrome, where captives come to identify with their captors.

N: I noticed that the machismo typically associated with Spanish culture was evident in all of the films, often as parody. Maybe "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" was a spoof on male dominance.

B: You may be right, but if it was, then I didn't catch it. I did enjoy, however, another film by Almodozar called "Dark Habits."

N: That's one of the films that's been compared to Luis Bunuel.

B: His influence ran strong. He's

probably the best-known Mexican director as well as being the best-known surrealist director.

N: One of the films I saw, "Don Juan, My Dear Ghost," had Bunuel-like surrealism. Anyway, what's "Dark Habits" about?

B: "Dark Habits" is about a convent where the nuns shoot heroin and drop acid while a giant tiger roams the convent like an overgrown house pet.

N: Is it funny?

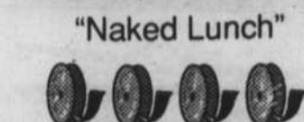
B: Yeah, it's funny, surreal and risqué. Every moment is charged with sexuality.

N: Is the humor slapstick or sarcastic?

B: It was a blasphemous parody of all the Spanish culture traditionally holds

See FRANCO on 10

Twisted writer's torture topic of new flick



By John Payne
Senior Reporter

Typewriters transform into giant, talking cockroaches, alien creatures beckon a troubled young writer to a strange Arabian land, and an extermi-

Viewer needs time to sift through symbolism

nator's bug spray is the drug of choice among the local junkies. Welcome to the bizarre world of William Burroughs, literary father to the drug culture.

"Naked Lunch" (Plaza 4 Theatre, 201 N. 12th St.), is director David Cronenberg's savagely twisted treatment of the Burroughs novel of the same name, though it has more to do with the writing process in general than events in the book. Chock-full of symbolism and disturbing images, "Naked Lunch" is likely to be difficult stuff, even for ardent readers of Burroughs.

The tale begins in New York with

a drug-addicted exterminator named William Lee (Peter Weller as a young Burroughs). A writer at heart, he gave up the practice when he was 10. "It's too dangerous," he tells his friends, themselves junkies and writers.

But killing bugs is merely a dodge for William. He knows that eventually he will have to confront the creative blocks that haunt him. Meanwhile, the extermination business provides him with a steady supply of pesticide, which doubles nicely as an intravenous drug.

His wife (Judy Davis, who plays two roles in the film) and friends inject the yellow powder, but Lee

tries to kick the habit. He gets help from Dr. Benway (Roy Scheider), who gives him a new drug that will end his dependency on the old one.

"Side effects?" Lee asks. "Nothing that will surprise the user," the good doctor assures him.

But the surprises are just beginning. When Lee accidentally shoots his wife in the head (Burroughs' wife died in a similar manner) he is forced into hiding. Following the instructions of a "Mugwump," a creature he meets in a bar, he flees to Interzone, a Moroccan city populated by eccentrics of every sort: gay street hustlers, evil aristocrats and neurotic writers

like himself.

And it's there that Lee begins writing again, just as Burroughs went to Tangier to write his novel. But what exactly is Lee writing? Classified reports on the activities of an Interzone spy ring? Reports on the production of a new drug? Or is he just working on a novel called "Naked Lunch?"

Audiences are left to ponder whether the characters and events are real or products of Lee's drug-induced hallucinations. Only after one leaves the theater and gives the film a day or so to take hold does the distinction between real and imaginary seem immaterial.

See NAKED on 10