

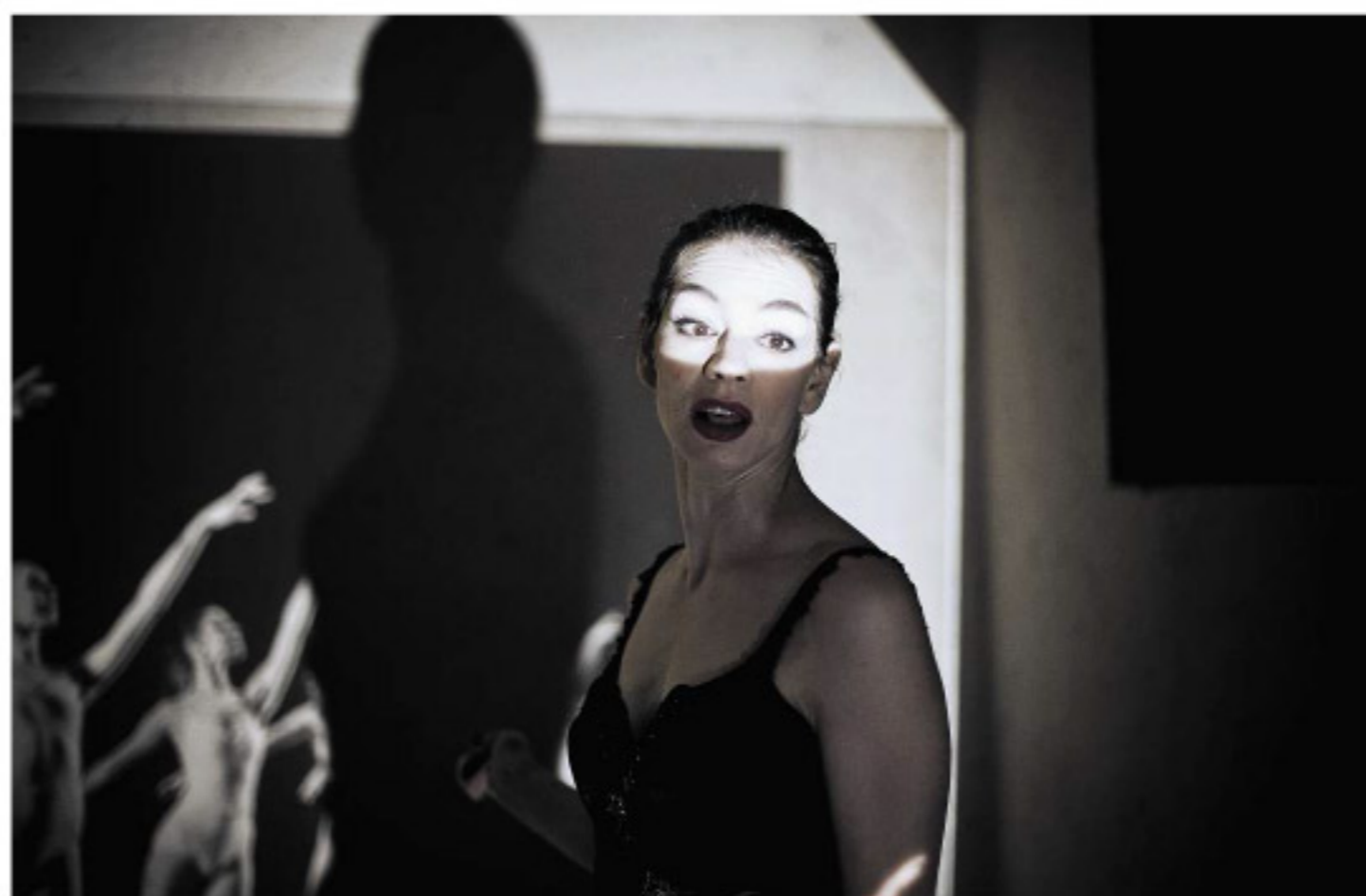
Culture

THEATER MUSIC



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOS LUJAN FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

The writer and former ballet dancer Toni Bentley at the Ritz Hotel in Madrid, above. Right, Isabelle Stoffel, who adapted Ms. Bentley's 2004 book "Surrender," in several scenes from the one-woman play. "I could tell," she said, "that this was just the perfect kind of material for a monologue."



Still pushing the boundaries

MADRID

Dancer's saucy memoir lands where she least expected to see it: A stage

BY RAPHAEL MINDER

In "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir," Toni Bentley predicted that, if her book was ever turned into a play, it would probably only reach "Off-Off-Off Broadway." It might end up being staged "in some dark performance space down some little-traveled back alley," she said of a story that follows how she reclaimed her sexual fulfillment.

But in December her 2004 book did reach the stage — here, in what has become one of Madrid's most successful alternative theaters, the Microteatro por Dinero, where it is scheduled to run until Jan. 19.

Ms. Bentley was a dancer. For 10 years she danced with the New York City Ballet, for George Balanchine and others, and in 1982 she published "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal." She has written other books, but "The Surrender" caused the most fuss.

The book was adapted into a one-woman play by Isabelle Stoffel — a Swiss actress who lives and works mostly in Spain — who also performs it. The intimate Microteatro, in a basement, is well suited to "The Surrender." It sits only about 50 people; the set is a candle-lit bedroom like the one in which Ms. Bentley spent time with a lover pushing the boundaries of her sexuality.

Ms. Stoffel said she had got in touch with Ms. Bentley, who lives in Los Angeles, to seek permission to adapt her book for the stage. "As soon as I started reading it," she said in an interview in the theater's upstairs bar, "I could tell that this was just the perfect kind of material for a monologue." What

attracted her, she added, was not so much its controversial and sexual subject matter but the fact that "it just felt so incredibly honest."

The language in Ms. Bentley's memoir is explicit and its attention to detail is often as extreme. Ms. Stoffel stuck to the original text, blending Ms. Bentley's thoughts and emotions with some of her more down-to-earth and even empirical observations. At one point, for instance, she launches into a lesson in anatomy. The audience follows her presentation with the help of an overhead projector and slides of the human body, part of the clever set designed by Alain Bainée, who has worked with the movie directors Woody Allen and Pedro Almodóvar.

Ms. Stoffel said she chose to deviate slightly from Ms. Bentley's portrayal by adding some naïveté to her account of how she managed to recover from a traumatic and failed marriage to find sexual liberation and fulfillment. "It seemed right to add a touch of ingenu-

ousness to the character because I didn't want her to come across as self-complacent or arrogant, which would have created some distance with the audience," Ms. Stoffel said.

Just as adapting a book was a first for Ms. Stoffel, so too was directing a play for the film director Sigfrid Monleón, with whom she had worked before, in front of the camera. "It's been an exciting learning process for both of us," Ms. Stoffel said. She hopes to transfer the play to a larger theater here, and to stage it in her native Switzerland and in the United States.

Ms. Bentley, who sat in the Microteatro's front row on two consecutive nights, was full of praise for Ms. Stoffel's performance, particularly given the "curious quirk" of having to watch a foreign actress tell her story in Spanish, which Ms. Bentley does not speak. "I most probably didn't get it the way the audience did," she said.

Ms. Bentley's account of submission at

the hands of a lover who goes by the pseudonym A-Man — and makes her discover sodomy — put her in the firing line of the feminist movement. "Some have been accusing me of setting back feminism 100 years, which is absurd," she said.

Instead, she insisted, "I'm not waving a banner of any sort about women. You could just as easily argue that 'The Surrender' is a very strong feminist book, because it strives to tell the truth loud and clear about what's seen as a taboo subject."

Despite the success of "The Surrender," which has sold more than 300,000 copies in 18 countries, Ms. Bentley said that she did not have any plans for more erotic writing. She is returning instead to ballet, the subject that has dominated most of her life and writing, with a book that will focus on "Serenade," the first work Balanchine produced in the United States in 1934.

Ms. Bentley danced for Balanchine at the start of her decade-long career with

the New York City Ballet that was ended by an injury. "I got terrible arthritis in my right hip, the kind of thing that you normally get when you're 75 or 80 rather than a young woman," she said.

"Most of the writing about sex is somewhere between terrible and awful, as can probably also be said about dancing," she said. "Whatever I'm going to be writing about, I don't think I should or will ever stop being personal."

"Serenade" also was the first of Balanchine's ballets that Ms. Bentley learned, making her latest project, which she says she is more than halfway through, "something quite experimental, in terms of writing about a ballet from the inside, in a way that hasn't perhaps been done before."

As the interview came to a close, Ms. Bentley looked taken aback when asked for her age. "I'm probably older than you think," she said, an unexpected reaction from an author who has been so revealing.