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CLASS ACT

Terrence McNally's play about opera diva Maria Callas
is a lesson in the value of passion in art

by Flora Sussely

Even if Terrence McNally hadn't written it, a play about Maria Callas would be worth seeing. And even if it were not a play about "the most wonderfully musical voice we had ever heard," we love a McNally play. So, what do you get when you cross Callas and McNally? *Master Class*, which opens Aug. 5 for a six-day run at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall.

The play, originally written for Zoe Caldwell,

Valour! Compassion! has to say to the straight community. (The pair earned him consecutive Tony Awards for best play—*Love! Valour! Compassion!* in 1995 and *Master Class* in 1996.) Indeed, his plays are about people—their relationships with themselves, their companions, their art.

In this *Master Class* of McNally's, he conjures the spirit of a great, passionate and tempestuous artist. We are taken into an intimate conversation with Callas about art, indeed about life.

Faye Dunaway courageously accepted the role while Patti Lupone was winning standing ovations for her performances directly after Zoe Caldwell won the Tony for it. That, my friends, takes chutzpah. And, the beauty of it is that she has come through every bit as wonderful as her predecessors. The press is ecstatic, and audiences are in love with Dunaway's Callas.

Dunaway's career started in the theater and hit its discovery zone in 1967 when she appeared in the film *Bonnie and Clyde*, a performance that earned her an Oscar nomination. She gets a lot of publicity for her temperament. To that she says:

Theater

(which won her last year's Tony Award) is a master class with the greatest opera diva of our time: Maria Callas.

For those of you who may not know, a master class is a vocal coaching lesson with a master artist—with an audience in attendance. There is an accompanist and a program and each singer performs an operatic aria or art song; when she or he stops, the master critiques and advises. It's very intimate in some ways, because everyone's so raw and nervous, and it also has incredible beauty and intensity. This is what McNally's play is about.

The master artist is Maria Callas, a gifted and brilliant opera diva who died in 1977 after rocking the opera world. She was so intelligent that she could learn an opera score overnight, even after her voice began to go (and it began to go early in her career). She was fearless and driven in her craft.

Callas would carry the chest voice up into her higher register and belt it out. Then she would sing distinct, graceful ascending phrases; each syllable was clear and, most of all, expressive. Her gift was the gift of expression. What she did not live, she sang.

Until her tragic affair with Aristotle Onassis, Callas had a life completely directed by and for her singing. Her husband was her manager. She went from home or hotel to theater and back. Dinner out would be pushing the envelope. She met Onassis on his yacht in the summer of 1959 and by that September she had filed for divorce. Unfortunately, Onassis was crass and ignorant, with a lack of respect for her art. Her emotional and physical health suffered as her life began increasingly to consist of parties and cruises. Then Onassis met Jacqueline Kennedy, and dumped Maria publicly after she had reportedly aborted his baby. Callas died sad and alone, her voice and her heart broken.

The master classes that McNally's play looks in on took place in a period of Callas' life when her voice was already shot. Clearly then, it is not a play that confuses the instrument and the artist. It is not Callas' voice we come to hear, it is her words. And McNally is very good at that. In a recent *Advocate* interview he noted that he just writes plays; he said he believes *Master Class* has as much to say to the gay community as *Love!*



Faye Dunaway in Master Class

"Of course I have temperament. Temperament is wonderful. It's only a problem if you get angry over nothing and it's not graceful." About her art, she says, "It's about the experience of the moment as opposed to the indication of the moment."

In the play, Callas tells a student who falls short of the mark, "You sang it, you didn't feel it." If you want to see a thinking, feeling performance, this is it.

Master Class is on stage Tuesday, Aug. 5, through Sunday, Aug. 10; evening performances begin at 7:30 pm; with 2 pm shows Saturday and Sunday. The Sunday matinee performance will be sign language interpreted. Tickets are \$10-\$45, and are available through TicketMaster, 790-ARTS, the Portland Center for the Performing Arts box office, Southwest Broadway and Main Street, or the Portland Opera office, 1515 SW Morrison St.

PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS