

The Divine Maria Callas

by [Phyllis Chesler](#) (December 2018)



The Paris Theater, now celebrating its 70th year and long known as a single screen “art house,” is located on West 58th St. near Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, right across the street from the Plaza Hotel. Back in the day, one could see a film, then cross the street to have coffee or high tea at the Palm Court and be serenaded by a violinist and a pianist.

I have happily been going to the Paris since the late 1950s when it was known for its foreign films aka serious cinema. Here, (and uptown, at the Thalia), is where I first saw Bergman, Fellini, Almodovar, Zeffirelli, Merchant and Ivory, the incomparable Deepa Mehta, and every movie that starred Joan Plowright and Maggie Smith. I was among the first on line for the New Year's Day showing of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*.



Once, the crowd was younger, film buffs all. Now, the Paris seems to draw cultured senior citizens—a dying yet magnificent breed. And so, many a gray head recently turned out (I among them) for the current offering: *Maria by Callas*, Tom Volf's [Terrence McNally](#) which presents Callas as pathetic, a failed woman, unable to persuade the love of her life to marry her, alone and without children.

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While this may even be true—she may have yearned for a more ordinary and happier life, and in Volf’s documentary she actually says so—but Callas’s ordinary life is of no interest to any serious opera goer. She is an immortal (think Brunhilde, think Emilia Marty of Janacek’s *Makropulous Affair*). We care about her because of her consummate artistry, not because she is a woman who may privately suffer the usual demons and dashed hopes that afflict mere mortals and that is so well depicted in opera.

I have always loved opera, despite the fact that, until recently, the great opera composers were all men; the settings too often aristocratic, exaggerated. Most divas suffer awful endings. They go mad (Lucia, Marguerite, Lady Macbeth), die of consumption (Violetta, Mimi), are buried alive (Aida), suffocated (Desdemona), burned (Norma, Azucena), or simply expire inexplicably (Isolde, Abigail). Others are stabbed (Carmen), knife themselves to death (La Gioconda, Butterfly), take poison (Leonora, Juliet), or leap to their death (Tosca, suspended forever in our imagination—an earlier, solo version of Thelma and Louise). ‘Tis true: their male counterparts often suffer similarly tragic fates.

That’s what makes it opera.

Am I romanticizing an art form that re-enacts patriarchal triumph and the “undoing of woman,” as Catharine Clement suggests in her book www.phyllis-chesler.com.

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