Maria Callas: The Opera

By Phyllis Chesler

Angelina Jolie's "Maria," and the real deal

Last night I watched Jolie play Maria. The film was as much a pathography as Terence McNally's play "Master Class" was. I am not interested in a great artist's drug addiction, depression, alcoholism, and madness, or in her alleged failings at both love and motherhood. Such sorrows may describe millions of women who do not command the stage and the hearts of millions. I am mainly interested in an artist's work, their almost divine accomplishments.

Callas's life was an opera, one in which the hero, (heroine?), sacrifice her divinity for love. And for wordly glamor. And this choice is a tragic one—La Callas became Aristotle Onassis's caged bird, a woman whom he demeaned as much as her mother once did. And yes, she lost her power, she fell like the mythic Icarus, or like Wagner's Brunnhilde; whether this was due to her having taken on too many different kinds of

musically demanding roles—or whether it was due to heartbreak, makes no difference. The once and future demi-Goddess could not live as a mere mortal.

Montserrat Caballe, Leontyne Price, Joan Sutherland, Renate Tebaldi, (all of Callas's time), had rich, powerful, and flawless vocal instruments. Callas's voice was imperfect, occasionally nasal, or shrill, sometimes "wobbly" as McNally wrote many years ago for "The Guardian," and yet, she is the one opera singer whom I'd call upon to pray to God for all humanity. Callas wasn't merely singing Norma or Tosca or Violetta or Medea, or Lucia, or Cio-Cio San, or Anna Bolena, she became each and every one. The characters lived, they became real. Callas's EMI recording of Carmen captured the seductive, heartless, and arrogant gypsy in a rather superb way.

Director Pablo Larrain's and actress Angelina Jolie's film featured beautiful Parisian locations, brilliant clothing, (magnificent furs, brocaded wraps), a superb apartment on the Avenue Georges Mandel, and imaginative conversatons, but the film was slow going. However, Jolie pitched her chin at just the right angle, conveyed very well Callas's presumed arrogance, even cruelty, as well as her descent into drugs and madness—and yet, the recordings, sung by the real Callas in the film, to which Jolie lip-synched very well, turned me dreamy, in search of lost times, and sent me immediately afterwards to my Met Opera streaming platform where I hunted, desperately, for even one of Callas's performances. I could fine none. I so I listened to some of her arias wherever I could find them.

Below, is a piece that I published twenty five years ago at the feminist magazine "On The Issues," published by my dear friend, Merle Hoffman. All you opera lovers out there, please enjoy it!

Do I contradict myself by loving opera? Once, I sang. In the

1950s, opera was an “approved” female activity that seemed to me far nobler than housewifery. Years later, when I underwent long, post-accident surgery, I brought a recording of Mozart’s **Marriage of Figaro** to the hospital, to be played, in its entirety, during surgery, and so keep my anesthetized self ever-mindful of joy on earth, lest it decide to stray. For a few absolutely wonderful years, I also appeared regularly at NPR’s “At The Opera” program, hosted by the very excellent Lou Santacroce.

I have always loved opera, despite the fact that, until recently, the great opera composers were all men; the settings aristocratic, misogynist. 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.)

Am I romanticizing an art form that re-enacts patriarchal triumph and the “undoing of woman,” as Catharine Clement suggests in her book **Opera, or the Undoing of Women**? Is opera dangerous because it both glorifies and de-sensitizes us to women’s daily destruction? Are opera’s women “only” severed, singing heads, witnesses to historical oppression, unable to escape it onstage—at least, not until we have done so in real life?

But where else, except on the operatic stage, can I see the dusky, the colonized, the outlawed, the pagan priestess (Aida, Carmen, Violetta, Norma), in Clement’s words, “sing their resistance”? Where else but at the opera can I see powerful, emotionally alive, sexual-spiritual women commanding such respect, or members of the ruling classes, in full evening

dress, weeping for a sexually independent gypsy (Carmen), or for a wife who kills her bridegroom to protest an arranged marriage (Lucia)? Perhaps the tragic endings are precisely what allow the divas to play untamed female heroes.

Where else but in the world of opera do we "allow" women, if they remain in good voice, to live: to visibly age, right along with the tenors and baritones; to sing large, dominant roles—and, despite an increasing number of exceptions, to be physically large?

At the beginning of her career, the legendary Maria Callas weighed over 200 pounds. For years, some critics scorned her as "the prima donna with an elephant's legs." In early photos, she is lusciously fleshy, moist, large. Her weight is what renders her most human, ordinary; unlike her utterly disciplined voice and acting technique, this is an excess which she cannot contain. Then, in one year, Callas loses at least 60 pounds, then more until, at 117 pounds, she becomes literally half her original size. Now she resembles the Duchess of Windsor, Audrey Hepburn, Jackie Kennedy Onassis: severely elegant women who move, not as priestesses on the operatic stage, but as status symbols or screen idols, clinging to the arms of monied, celebrated men.

Contrary to the popular pathographies (biographies that diminish their subjects by psychiatrically demonizing them), Callas did not diet for mortal love, but for immortal Art. Opera critic John Ardoin quotes Callas as saying: "I was getting so heavy that my vocalizing was heavy…. I was tired of playing the part of a beautiful young woman and I was too heavy to move around…. I studied all my life to put things right musically. Why don't I diet and make myself presentable?"

But Callas remained "too large" in other ways. Her "light" soprano voice dared all vocal registers and roles: the spinto, lyric, dramatic, coloratura and mezzo-soprano. Ardoin is

right: It's as if Callas has "not three but three hundred voices in one." Callas sang Verdi and Wagner, Puccini and Donizzeti and Bellini, Mozart and Bizet—and nearly everyone else.

Callas does not have a "good" voice. Unlike the great Rosa Ponselle, Montserrat Caballe, or Joan Sutherland, Callas' voice is not serene, or beautifully tame. Musicologist Attila Csampai writes that Callas' art "is an incessant declaration of war against the aesthetics of the perfectly balanced register, against the impersonal, flawless, soullessly beautiful tone that can be examined like an immaculate female figure." If you have ever listened to her, you know that Callas' voice is, alternately, breathlessly young, ravaged, tender, nasal, shrill—but perfection itself when it comes to beseeching the sky gods to take pity on earth's children. Callas' voice is Michaelangelo's Pieta or his Sistine Chapel paintings made song: celestial, serene or passionately mid-earthly. The timbre is a lamenting lullaby or, as conductor Nicola Rescigno puts it, "like Casals playing the cello."

Callas subjugated voice to character. She threw herself into each role, developed it as if she were a Method Actor. "It is not enough to have a beautiful voice," she said. "When you interpret a role, you have to have a thousand colors to portray happiness, joy, sorrow, fear…. Even if you sing harshly sometimes, as I have frequently done, it is a necessity of expression."

In the beginning, Callas took every part she was offered; indeed, she sang roles (Turandot, Isolde, Norma) that many sopranos refuse because they demand enormous preparation, stamina, and vocal range. "They damage and devastate the voice," says opera critic Ethan Mordden. Some critics believe that her theatrical perfectionism, coupled with so many different, but equally taxing, kinds of roles, may have led to Callas' early, tragic loss of voice. Contrary to myth, Callas was physically frail; performing—on her terms—literally made

her sick. Fame only upped the ante. Of her debut at Covent Garden, Callas said: “I had been preceded in London by sensational publicity, and I was terrified by the idea of being unable to live up to expectations. It’s always like that, for us artists: We labor for years to make ourselves known, and when fame finally follows our steps everywhere, we are condemned always to be worthy of it, to outdo ourselves so as not to disappoint the public, which expects wonders of its idols.”

I have never idolized anyone, including Callas. I am not haunted by Callas the woman, but by Callas the artist, who, at her best, is merged in our collective memory with many of the roles she sang. Callas is Norma, the Druid priestess (a role she revived, and sang on stage 89 times); Tosca—vain, “violent,” devoted to a life of art; the murderous Medea, Lucia, Tosca; the dying Mimi and Violetta. The “real” Callas is all of these—who aren’t real at all. Or are they?

They are real: Opera fans never forget them, and return to them, season after season, from one century to the next. This is the power that art has over both life and death.

For a year, I wanted to write “The Autobiography of Maria Callas.” Her soul, art, life, times, all called to me. I listened to her recordings and interviews, watched her on film, read her own brief **Memoir**, read the critics, the pathographies, her family’s memoirs. I came to realize that Callas’ artistic life can only be understood as an opera. Nothing less will do. Are any interested composers out there? I’m longing to write the libretto.

Act One: Maria is the younger of two sisters. She believes she is unlovable; she is also a child prodigy. Maria begins studying opera at the age of seven. She drops out of school after the eighth grade and, driven both by her talent and by an ambitious, devouring mother, devotes herself to studying music, full-time. Callas: “I [had] unlimited faith in the

divine protection that would not fail me." Maria sings in Athens when she is 15. In 1947, at 24, she sings in Verona where, both friendless and impoverished, she meets her husband-to-be, Giovanni Battista Mengeghini, who sees her as the vulnerable genius that she is. Battista is 28 years her senior—but he is a man who has money, and who wishes nothing more than to nurture his wife's career. Battista puts himself second, his wife's career first. It takes Maria about 15 years to "suddenly" conquer the opera world. In her words: It is a "tiger" she rides, one she can "never dismount."

Act Two: The world treats Callas with a jinxing and fatal combination of voyeurism, adoration, terror, hatred, envy, and devotion. She is constantly photographed, but also hooted at, drowned out, demonstrated against, sued. Like Turandot (the chaste Chinese opera-princess), Callas has never loved or lusted after anything but artistic perfection. Like Brunnhilde, daughter of Wotan, in Wagner's **Die Walkure**, the divine Callas is fated to experience mortality: She leaves her nurturing, powerful father (Battista), her own swarthy, fleshy self, her Art—for mortal love, in this case, love for a patriarchal hero, Aristotle Onassis. Like Norma, Callas gives herself to Pollione/the Conquering Culture. Like Brunnhilde, she is now a fallen daughter, destined for ordinary life.

Act Three: Once Callas decides to become mortal, she is no longer in her familiar, divinely protected element. She begins to lose her voice—her power. She stops performing. Her genius can no longer protect her from the indignities of ordinary life, or from the "shame" of being demoted from the status of demi-goddess. The fact that her lover demeans her singing, won't marry her; in fact, publicly humiliates her when he marries another, less talented woman, Jackie Kennedy, may be important, but is also besides the point. The diva cannot "succeed" as an ordinary woman. At 50, Callas refuses to become the Artistic Director of the Metropolitan, stars in Pasolini's film of **Medea**, sings concerts for a while, but then

retreats from the world. She dies in Paris, alone, a drug addict, amidst her mementos. She is 54 years old.

Curtain.

First published in Phyllis' Newsletter