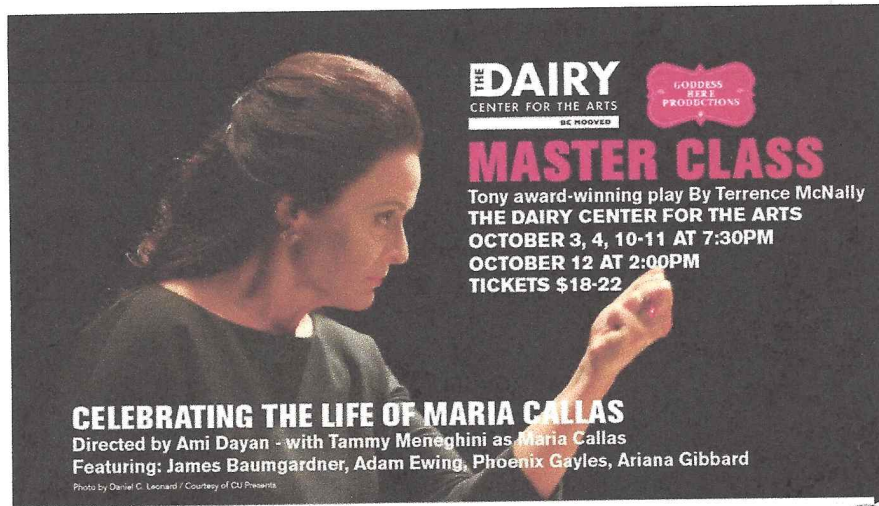

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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2014

Master Class


 26TH & WALNUT STREET | BOULDER
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Playwright: Terrence McNally

Company: Goddess Here Productions

Venue: The Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut Street, Boulder, CO, 80302.

Running Time: 2 hours 20 minutes (includes 15 minute intermission).

Date of Performance: Saturday, October 11, 2014

"I just want to sing."

For the gifted students in Maria Callas' master class, such a statement is simultaneously true and extremely naive. To sing is not enough for Callas, and she is brutally direct with her ill prepared and shrinking students. Or, as Callas describes them, her "victims."

In an effort to teach them how to be artists as well as singers, she intimidates them. She insults them. She shames them. The difference between a diva and a bully is imperceptible.

For those who haven't seen McNally's *Master Class*, consider her a precursor to Simon Cowell of *America's Got Talent* and it's transatlantic cousin, *Britain's Got Talent*. In a delicious irony, Cowell, he of no perceptible talent, doles out cringeworthy insults to aspiring artists who may actually accomplish something one day. Callas, at least the one portrayed here in *Master Class*, may have been Cowell's inspiration; she certainly exhibited the profound narcissism that Cowell has embraced.

Callas' lesson for the students is that if one chooses artistic success as a goal, all other goals must evaporate. Every detail, every note, every gesture, must be carefully and

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ABOUT ME


Bill Wheeler

 Colorado Springs, Colorado,
 United States

Welcome to Theater Colorado. Feel free to browse these posts and to leave your comments, suggestions, or complaints. I'm a theater fan, and I post reviews here to give feedback, and recognition, to the talented people who make Colorado theater happen. I read all comments. Let me know what you think...

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fully researched. One must suffer for art, as she herself has done.

Callas is correct. Art requires extreme sacrifices and considerable suffering. What she misses, though, is the paradox that she, the artist, inflicts additional suffering on her aspiring students, and does so gleefully. Presumably, students in a master class are already well acquainted with the sacrifices they must make to succeed.

Tammy L. Meneghini is a frightening, unapproachable, insufferable, and cold Callas. In other words, she nails it. She flits and swaggers across the stage, flaunting her success and her suffering for her art. She can, and does, induce vomiting. Meneghini even confronts the



Tammy L. Meneghini (Maria Callas).

audience; patrons in the front rows will feel the sting of the glares, the stares, and the insults of *La Davina*.

Meneghini delicately balances the forces that consume Callas. This master class is about Maria, not the students. Callas does have a message here though, and Meneghini delivers it with eloquence: *art is not for the meek, and it does not come easily*. It is this balance of cruelty and profundity that Meneghini masters for us. We see Callas, through Meneghini, as an artist and, to some extent, as a victim.

Meneghini shows us the uncomfortable truth: a successful artist is not necessarily a successful human being. In fact, the two may be mutually exclusive.

The test of a good teacher is whether the students are better or smarter for having been in the class. Callas does not care whether she is a good teacher, or, for that matter, whether she has any effect whatsoever on those students. As a result, her value as the "Master" of the *Master Class* is dubious at best.

McNally, though, through Callas, makes one additional important point: artists should be paid fair value for their talent. It's a point that all too often falls on deaf ears.

This *Goddess Here* production is strong. Both sopranos (Ariana Gibbard and Phoenix Gayles) have exquisite voices. It is annoying that they are constantly interrupted by Callas. Graham's aria from Verdi's *Macbeth* is a show stopper, despite Callas' advice to lower her expectations after hearing it.

It is Tony Candelino (James Baumgardner), though, who is the match for Callas in this *Master Class*. Baumgardner combines a honey smooth tenor voice with the attitude to challenge *La Davina's* callousness (pun intended). His rendition of "*Recondita Armonia*" from Puccini's *Tosca* is the musical high point of the play. Baumgardner needs no coaching from a self absorbed diva. His voice, and his interpretation of the music, are stellar.

Adam Ewing accompanies on the piano, but also does a superb job of playing along with Callas to her face, while sporting a mischievous smirk when she's not. He provides a counter balance to Callas' onstage excesses, without saying a word about them.

For opera fans, *Master Class* may not contain enough opera to overcome Callas' quirky, jerky, side show. For theater fans, though, *Master Class* is a poignant, provocative look at how theatrical sausage is made. It's not a pretty sight, but the reality is that there are great sacrifices made to produce great art. *Master Class* reminds us artists are human beings with incredible talent and passion. That there are "victims" made daily in the process should not be forgotten.

Unfortunately, I was unable to see this show until the last weekend of its short run. It's a pity; it's now too late for any reader to get a ticket. Trust me, though. *Master Class* was a small masterpiece of provocative theater.