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Theater: Tyne Daly Delivers a "Master Class"

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MASTER CLASS ** 1/2 out of ****
MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

Terrence McNally's idea for this play -- to show an opera singer conducting a master class, complete with nervous students, moments of musical glory and the audience made complicit as if they were merely attending that event rather than a drama -- is so simple and yet rich with possibility, I imagine other playwrights kicked themselves for not having thought of it first.

McNally made the diva at the heart of the show the great but aging Maria Callas, her voice shot but her ego

in full force. Callas imperiously asks for the lights to be turned down in the auditorium, demands water, wonders where the seat cushion she has asked for repeatedly might possibly be, continually brings the conversation back to herself even as she insists this master class is not about her, and almost as an aside cuts to the quick the three promising young singers who have come to perform and get some insights or tips from the great one.

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This is the first time I've seen the show and it's easy to imagine the role being played broadly for laughs. Daly however is a model of restraint. She's funny, astringent and cutting, without ever getting too grand or camp. Two major monologues are a little less successful here. First, Callas has a long conversation with her lover Aristotle Onassis which doesn't come off very convincingly until Callas then segues into the memory of one of her greatest triumphs at La Scala. In the second act, Callas falls into a memory hole yet again, this time reliving the painful moment when she becomes pregnant and Onassis tells her to get rid of it.

But by and large this is a light drama, played a little too broadly for my tastes by the three actors who come in to sing. Alexandra Silber makes her Broadway debut as the goofy Sophie De Palma, whose nervousness is not relieved in the least by Callas. Silber's voice is not terribly convincing in the classical pieces she tackles so I was never clear what we were supposed to think: is Sophie not that talented or is Callas simply uninterested in finding that out?

Garrett Sorenson has the best voice for this genre and yet is the weakest actor, playing the outgoing Anthony Candolino as an eager puppy. And yet, Sorenson for all his lack of subtlety when acting has charisma and presence and a friendly chemistry with Daly that works marvelously. His scene is the only time we know exactly how talented he is and how Callas feels about it. Sorenson's musical climax is also the moment that sends a genuine thrill through the audience so it was no surprise to discover in the Playbill that he's a rising star in the opera world.

The confusion returns with Sierra Boggess as Sharon Graham, a role knocked out of the park by Audra McDonald in the original production. Boggess (who starred in *The Little Mermaid*) doesn't convince as an opera singer. So when she and Callas come to blows, it's unclear what director Stephen Wadsworth's intent might be. It could be played many ways. Graham could be a genuine talent and thus Callas cuts her down as a threat. Or Graham could be talented but only of a certain sort. She certainly wouldn't be the first to be told she wasn't right for a particular role like Lady Macbeth so Callas is simply being blunt. The fireworks between the two just fizzle out. Jeremy Cohen has the fewest lines of the principals but creates a warm, distinct personality as the pianist Manny Weinstock. He knows how to provide accompaniment both as a musician and an actor.

Played broadly and musically uncertain, this *Master Class* doesn't do full justice to the quiet charms of McNally's play. But Daly never puts a foot wrong. No wonder she's a Tony winner and (I believe) the only person to win an Emmy for a leading role in three different TV shows. When she's leaving the stage and almost -- but not quite -- picks up an orange given to her as a sentimental gift, it's a brief but poignant moment she captures easily. Callas doesn't want our pity but she always commands our attention, especially when played by Daly.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park **

Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2 out of ****

Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2

Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***

One Arm ***



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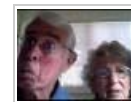
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Zarkana **

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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