

Maria by Callas: A documentary on the life of the famed opera singer

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8 December 2018

From France, Tom Volf's *Maria by Callas* is an engrossing documentary about the legendary Greek-American opera soprano. An intimate portrait of Maria Callas (1923-1977) is presented through archival material, television interviews, home movies, family photographs and unpublished memoirs. Opera star Joyce DiDonato reads Callas' words, when recordings of Callas are unavailable.

Volf's research is meticulous. He tracked down a global array of people with expertise on Callas, filming interviews with 30 of the singer's friends in nearly a dozen countries who "opened up their cupboards and pulled out 8mm films, audio tape reels, letters, and photos. He quickly realized that a large part of this memorabilia was previously unseen and had never been shown in public before," according to the movie's production notes.

Says Volf: "I understood very quickly that she was not only a phenomenon in her lifetime, she was still a phenomenon in 2013, nearly four decades after her death."

One of the film's highlights is Callas' 1970 interview with commentator and television host David Frost. Portions of the 17-minute interview are interspersed throughout the documentary, which toggles between her career and personal life. A key theme of *Maria by Callas* is Maria's comment to Frost, "There are two people in me actually, Maria and Callas ... If someone really tries to listen to me, he will find all of myself there." Volf is adept at presenting, as he says, "how the two communicate and sometimes struggle, and sometimes sacrifice one to the other."

One segment shows dedicated young people waiting, and sleeping, on line in New York City for a chance to hear Callas sing. Also mentioned is her notorious (she was ill) 1958 "Rome Cancellation," as well as her

publicized conflict with the Metropolitan Opera's general manager (1950-1972) Rudolf Bing. There is, as well, in-depth footage of her complicated relationship with Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis. Longtime friend Nadia Stancioff (author of *Maria Callas Remembered*) and Georges Prêtre, one of her favorite conductors, also form part of the film's fabric.

Notably, Callas worked with Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini on his film, *Medea* (1969), her only film role, and developed a close friendship with the influential director and writer.

The film brings out the immense pressures exerted on Callas by the demands, on the one hand, of an art form that requires constant artistic obsession and near perfection and, on the other, of her status, in the words of a commentator, as "one of the world's first international celebrities, especially after she began her affair with shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis in 1959. The paparazzi couldn't get enough of her." The combined pressures may well have helped lead to her early death from a heart attack at the age of 53, while living in considerable isolation.

Undoubtedly, one of the film's most breathtaking moments is Callas' 1958 performance in concert of "Casta Diva" (Chaste Goddess), the famed aria from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*. Sung at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra in Paris, it is, according to the movie's production notes, "presented for the very first time in color and shows a Callas at the pinnacle of her career. We will see her *Norma* seven years later in the film, when she has to abandon the stage in Paris in 1965. It's the last time she ever sang it and her last but one performance ever on an operatic stage. One could say her career started with *Norma* (back in 1947) and ended with it."

Also featured are sublime performances of arias from

Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* —“Addio del passato” (Farewell to the Past, 1958); Georges Bizet's *Carmen* —“L'amour est un oiseau rebelle” (Love is a Rebellious Bird, 1962); and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*—“Vissi d'arte, Vissi d'amore” (I Lived for Art, I Lived for Love, 1963).

Volf's films does not choose to take up the more controversial question of Callas's activity, while still a teenager, in occupied Greece during World War II. In *The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years*, author Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis discusses the singer's performances at concerts attended by Italian and German troops. He takes note of “the number of Greek singers who took part, although the events were organized by the loathed enemy. Even those with leftist political views seldom missed such opportunities to make a public appearance, to further their careers and be rewarded for their services, usually with food that could not otherwise be obtained at any price. Of course there was no question of their being accused of collaboration.”

However, in Callas' case, “her accusers have concentrated much more on her social intercourse with Italians ... than on her ‘collaboration’ in the field of music ... In [Callas'] case it is beyond question that she did have close friendships with a number of Italians on a clearly personal basis.”

In a review of Petsalis-Diomidis's book, the *Telegraph* wrote, “There is also a lot here about Callas' personal life. Her mother, as they used to say, was no better than she should be during the war, with lovers ranging from an Italian colonel to German officers. Callas took up with a Fascist major, a paratrooper, a German music critic, a British officer who got her a job at Army HQ and a Greek businessman (shades of things to come), who paid for her return ticket to America.”

It should be noted that left-wing Italian artists such as Pasolini and Luchino Visconti did not consider Callas' wartime activities an obstacle. Visconti first directed the singer in a 1954 production of Gaspare Spontini's *La Vestale* at Milan's La Scala. Four other collaborations (one of them conducted by Leonard Bernstein) followed over the course of several years. In a 1969 joint television interview, Visconti explained, “I started to direct opera because of ... no, not because of, but *for* Maria Callas.”



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