

Theater Review: Crumb brings Callas to life with 'Class'

Published: Monday, February 22, 2010

By NEAL ZOREN

Special to the Times

Ann Crumb does not speak during the emotional, revelatory passages in Terrence McNally's "Master Class." She delivers arias — beautiful, involving, cadenced, and mesmerizing arias that draw you to the actress and the character she plays so brilliantly, the diva of divas, Maria Callas.

Crumb is a constant delight throughout "Master Class," as directed by Jesse Cline at the Media Theatre. When she is not bewitching the audience with an avalanche of words and feeling she makes into intense music, she is delighting us with her comic glances and asides, letting us see the genius and wiliness of Maria Callas, and while she's at it, the genius and wiliness of Ann Crumb.

Crumb's performance is a bravura display of timing, intelligence, spell weaving, and sincerity. It exudes the honesty, preparation, and humanity McNally has Callas speak about in his excellent play that had its world premiere in Philadelphia in 1995 and earned a Tony for Best Play in 1996 after it moved to Broadway. I would urge McNally to come to Media to see Crumb bring his play to exuberant and touching life. Like McNally, Crumb has found the soul of opera, and the author may benefit not only to see his work presented so giftedly by Crumb and Cline but to see what "Master Class" has that another McNally world premiere, "Golden Age," just closed at the Philadelphia Theater Company, lacks.

"Golden Age" is set to move to Washington to be part of a trilogy with "Master Class" and "Lisbon Traviata" of McNally's opera-based plays at the Kennedy Center. When seen on opening night in Philadelphia, it wasn't ready to transfer anywhere except McNally's desk for serious editing and rewriting. By coming to Media, McNally can learn two things. One is the plot moves, storytelling, and well-placed and conceived emotional outpourings that make "Master Class" a masterpiece. The other is how an actress of skill and depth can work her alchemy and make what is already gold into a diamond.

One major flaw in "Golden Age" was the performance of Amanda Mason Warren as the 19th century diva assoluta of legend, Maria Malibran, the Callas of her day. In that role, Warren must show the difference between technical singing, as practiced by another diva, and the emotional truth that, when presented, makes opera extraordinary. The problem is Warren fell flat. She could muster neither the intensity nor importance of the words she was saying. She demonstrated the opposite of what the Malibran character is supposed to do, enchant.

Crumb, on the other hand, goes beyond enchantment. You hang on every crisply enunciated syllable. You roll with her, you feel with her, you understand her joys and pains, triumphs and disappointments. Crumb embodies opera, personifies music, and plumbs depths that move you to love Maria Callas and enjoy her even when she is bedeviling a poor student who has ventured into her class. Crumb introduces you to a Callas who has experienced life and delivered art and seeks truth without malice, so whatever she says or does, she's earned the right to do it, and Crumb does it charmingly.

In "Master Class," McNally finds the perfect framework for showing his lead character to the world. Maria Callas, voice gone, at least for the purpose of performing a major role on a major stage, is conducting a class for top opera students at a Manhattan conservatory, presumably the Met or Juilliard. She is demanding to the point of being ruthless, honest to the point of hurting feelings. Her ruthlessness is entertaining. McNally finds the right archness, the right tone to amuse the audience while browbeating the student. Her honesty is necessary. Callas stands for something. She says when she goes on a stage, she doesn't want to act, she wants to be. She does not play Tosca, she is Tosca, a woman who sings about being her art and being love instead of merely practicing one and experiencing the other.

Callas inculcates her principles to her students. They must know their character, even beyond what a librettist has written. They must be aware of what a character is striving for and what she or he will do to achieve an objective. Most of all, they must express all of this to an audience in a way that is authentic yet thrilling. In giving his Callas these standards to express, McNally is even more definite than Hamlet in telling a performer the pathway to artistry. Among Ann Crumb's triumphs is how much her Callas lives up to what she demands from others. Retired from singing in anger or not, she, like Tosca, is art, and she isn't accepting any less, or the will to be any less, from someone because he or she happens to be a student.

While conducting the class, Callas can recall her own emotions. McNally deftly weaves Callas' performance and actual biography into "Master Class" via long sweeping soliloquies, the passages Crumb converts into flawless arias. Writing, character development, exposition, and acting converge in a cunning and delightful way. Especially on the Media stage where "Master Class" is being seen at its best. With the snow that marred the last two weekends abated, people should make their way to Media to see Crumb and McNally in all their brilliance before "Master Class" folds all too soon on Sunday.

Among the joys of art is collaboration. "Master Class" is not a one-person show, and Crumb is not out there alone. She is supported, first off, by Cline who has given her the freedom to evoke while molding her performance and dressing it in accentuating lighting as designed by Troy Martin O'Shia. When Crumb stands turned one quarter toward stage right, the light bathes her face and adds texture and darkness that makes her look like Maria Callas. The effect is correctly momentary, but it is also haunting. O'Shia also creates shadows that comment appropriately on what is happening on stage, and the light in which he arrests Crumb during her emotive passages enhances the experiences and helps draw you further into the actress' spellbinding web.

A diva must have a foil. For Callas, it is the master class's young accompanist, Manny Weinstock, played with perfect humility and grace by Tom Fosnocht.

Manny is not an easy or throwaway part. Fosnocht must play the piano excellently, which he did, and a show a kind of shy deference while not allowing himself to be totally steamrolled by the Gorgon at the gate. The actor/pianist walks that line expertly. His bio makes it clear Fosnocht is primarily interested in a career as a musician. He should think about acting. "Master Class" is not the only play that requires a musician and features him prominently.

Among the students, Logan Rucker, a tenor, does the best combining acting with opera skill.

Any occasion where one can hear Elisa Matthews' excellent, expressive voice is one to savor. Matthews plays the student who transforms the most from Callas' tutelage. The treat comes when she is finally allowed by her teacher to do a good chunk of Lady Macbeth's letter scene a la Verdi. Allison Hymel is all enthusiasm and innocence as the student Callas decimates. Tim Haney plays the conservatory's janitor/prop guy with the indifference that makes it all the funnier and truer when he leaves the room and Callas says, "People like that, they don't understand what we're doing here."

"Master Class" with Ann Crumb at the Media Theatre, allows you to see exactly why opera has lasted and will last for centuries. When done as theater, something that happens too rarely, and with attention to character, not always the case, opera is a grand blending of music and theater that cannot be matched in the performing arts pantheon.

IF YOU GO: "Master Class" extended through Sunday, Feb. 27 at the Media Theatre, 104 E. State St., in Media. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$36 for adults with discounts for seniors and children. (For \$49, the Media offers a ticket to "Master Class" and a meal at a nearby restaurant, Generations.) Tickets can be ordered by calling 610-891-0100 or visiting www.mediatheatre.org.