

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Media Theatre Company presents "Master Class"



By Howard Shapiro
Inquirer Theater Critic

They referred to the renowned opera soprano [Maria Callas](#) as *La Divina*, and awarded her with curtain calls galore - at one point, 27. So as a moniker, *La Divina* is already taken. No problem. You can call Ann Crumb, simply, Divine.

Crumb plays the opera singer in Media Theatre's production of *Master Class*, in a portrayal so deft, so remarkably considered, she must be channeling La Divina, who died in 1977. Crumb's every move is sensual and in character - each step across the Media stage, each sweep of her arms, each turn of her head. She wastes not a second in her interpretation of [Terrence McNally's](#) script - her Callas is direct, demonstrative, and frequently devastating.

You could argue that Crumb's Greek accent for Callas is too mild, but, in fact, it's clearly there, and she can turn it on and then lower it to good effect - like a guy from the Bronx who ratchets up New Yawk-talk to make a point, then returns to everyday English. In two major scenes - when McNally sends Callas deep into memory as she supposedly watches students perform in the master class she's giving - Crumb's rendition is downright enthralling.

That's not unlike the original, with [Zoe Caldwell](#) as Callas, which had its world premiere at the Philadelphia Theatre Company in 1995 in a production that went on to Broadway and to win the best-play Tony in 1996. Like Caldwell, Crumb may offer us La Divina's characteristics, but she does not attempt an impersonation. What she seeks - and achieves - is an interpretation of the woman, which turns McNally's smart script into a memorable theatrical experience.

McNally's newest play, also set in the opera world, is *Golden Age*, running in its world premiere at the Philadelphia Theatre Company, then moving in March to Washington's Kennedy Center. In that play, set in 1835, he's drawn the composer Vincenzo Bellini as a cartoonish figure on whom the action centers. (Callas soared in her interpretation of Bellini's work.)

In *Master Class*, though, McNally conjures a Callas of flesh and blood - as concerned about high Fs as she is about finding a decent wash-and-set at the beauty parlor. Crumb, a woman with local roots whose work as an actress and singer has taken her to Broadway and [Europe](#), carries this Callas seamlessly from the script to the stage.

Jesse Cline, Media Theatre's artistic director, has staged *Master Class* with just the right tone and timing - and you feel, looking at Joe LeDuc's beautifully arched white back wall, that you're at every classroom stage where students sweat out their professors' final judgments. Maggie Baker's costume design sheaths Crumb in a hugging dress that adds to the elegance, and Troy Martin O'Shia's lighting helps strip the character figuratively naked in the memory scenes.

Bravo, too, to Elisa Matthews, Logan Rucker, and Allison Hymel as the students seeking feedback from Callas; to Tim Haney as the stagehand who ignores all barbs from the diva; and to the actor/pianist Tom Fosnocht, whose performance, on and off the keyboards, is excellent.

And kudos also to Friday's opening-night audience - 35 or so folks who walked in as snow began falling hard in Media but appeared to forget the threatening conditions outside as conditions inside evolved into a riveting piece of theater.

Master Class

Playing at Media Theatre, 104

E. State St., Media, through

Feb. 21. Tickets: \$36-\$42.50. Information: 610-891-0100; www.mediatheatre.org