



MASTER & STUDENT: (left to right) Sierra Boggess & Tyne Daly in revival of *Master Class* on Broadway.
Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Master Class:

Tyne Daly's gutsy take on Maria Callas

MASTER CLASS

Book by Terrence McNally

Directed by Stephen Wadsworth

Through August 21, 2011

Manhattan Theatre Club at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street, (212-239-6200)

www.ManhattanTheatreClub.com

By David NouNou

Revivals are a great way of re-examining a theatrical piece and its durability, especially if the work is an award-winning play. I must admit that I am a sucker for revisiting seldom-revived plays, and Terrence McNally's *Master Class* is no exception. It was the 1996 Tony-winning drama for Best Play, Best Actress, Zoe Caldwell, and Best Featured Actress, Audra McDonald.

I know back then I was really rooting for it to win Best Play, and there was no contest in the Best Actress category. No one had a chance running against the legendary Ms. Caldwell, La Divina of the theatrical world. Seeing what *Master Class* was up against that year, I can understand the victory in 1996. (The other Best Play nominees were weak and, in some cases, big, pretentious bores). However, if it would have opened earlier this year, and qualified for the 2011 Tonys, other than Tyne Daly as Maria Callas for Best Actress, what else would it have been up for?

This is not to say that *Master Class* is not still enjoyable, entertaining, and enthralling. In this version, it seems less of a play and more of an extended monologue. We are still attending a master class being taught by Maria Callas (La Divina, as she was lovingly referred to in her prime) at Julliard in 1971-72, coaching aspiring opera singers. The only supporting cast member Broadway audiences might know is Sierra Boggess (*The Little Mermaid* and *Love Never Dies* in

London) as Sharon Graham, the student that challenges the diva's authority, but is no match for Ms. Daly's Callas. On a brighter note, Alexandra Silber as the eager-to-please pupil, Sophie De Palma, is a delight.

With uninspired direction by Stephen Wadsworth and lackluster performances by some of the supporting cast, all the attention to the fine details that Callas demanded of herself and her students is collectively missing. In the scenes in which Callas recalls her earlier years with Aristotle Onassis, or her much older husband, the scenes should be as operatic and rhapsodic as an aria. Instead, in this revival they often come across as a diva merely remembering moments of her past. The grand operatic scale is missing. Regardless, it is still mesmerizing watching the mega-talented Ms. Daly's earthy interpretation of Callas, for she literally gives it all she has.

Being that most of Ms. Caldwell's shows were either produced or overseen by her late husband, Robert Whitehead, one knew that no detail was too small or went unnoticed. The cast had to be on the same level as Ms. Caldwell, and the production details were fully realized. Hence, this show was originally a play and not a monologue. This is not to impugn Ms. Daly's performance in any way. She does deliver the proverbial goods, and in grand style. However, Ms. Daly lacks the patrician quality that came so naturally to Ms. Caldwell and which she imbued in her take on Callas. Ms. Daly is not fortunate enough to have such a mentor to have seen to all the finer details that the play desperately needs, but she literally carries this monologue on sheer guts and determination, making this revival of *Master Class* worth a look despite its shortcomings.

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