

Provincetown Repertory Theatre
presents

Master Class

*Tony
Award
Winner
for Best Play*

Written by
Terrence McNally

Sept 12 - 21 nightly at 8:30PM

Directed by Bart J. Murell

**with McNeely Myers,
Ben Coppelman, Mark Cortale,
Bridget Murphy, Nell Snaidas, and John Thomas**

Stage Manager: Tara M. Galvin

Lighting Design: Christopher Ostrom

Costume Design: Carol Sherry

Sound Design: Sam Provost

Arts & Entertainment

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Master Class

puts director
to the test



PHOTO TARA M. GLAVIN
McNeeley Myers and Nell

McNeely Myers and Nell Snaidas in a scene from "Master Class."

By Ann Wood

BANNER STAFF

He's gone from directing a community theater hippie love rock musical to an Equity production of a Tony Award-winning opera play — all in the span of about a month.

But Bart Murell is ready. He's not even nervous about "Master Class" playwright Terrance McNally coming to see the show.

"I can't be worried about that," he says. "I've been wanting to do this [play] for a while. It's about passion. It's about what it takes to be an artist in my mind."

He's also not too worried about jumping headfirst into the realm of professional theater.

"Yeah, whoopee. That was a little scary. But I'm proud of it. They came to me," says Murell, adding that years ago he proposed the production of "Master Class" to Provincetown Theatre Company — which recently produced Murell's sold-out

direction of "Hair" — but the play was dismissed as too difficult to cast. Provincetown Repertory Theater, however, saw things a little differently.

"But [Rep producing director] David [Fortuna], he just wanted to go for it," Murell says, adding that while few actors auditioned, the ones who did were perfect.

The lead is being played by McNeely Myers, who was last seen on the Outer Cape in Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater's production of "Driving on the Sidewalk." She is joined by nationally acclaimed soprano Nell Snaidas, opera veteran Mark Cortale and New England Conservatory of Music graduate Bridget Murphy.

The play is based on the master classes held by opera diva Maria Callas at New York's Juilliard School. Rep artistic director Norris Church Mailer says that McNally observed one of these classes and thought it would be wonderful to turn it into a play with flashbacks to periods throughout Callas's life. In this play, the other actors — and the audience — are her students. The play calls for a glamorous, commanding, larger-than-life and drop-dead funny

Callas. But it's not all fun and games. Callas is one tough teacher — sometimes reducing vocalists to tears.

"Master Class" will be performed at 8:30 p.m. beginning Friday and will run through Sept. 21, with 3 p.m. matinees on Saturdays (there will be no show Sept. 17), at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House, 236 Commercial St., Provincetown. Tickets are \$25 and can be purchased at Box Office Provincetown by calling (508) 487-7487.

While Murell has been directing at PTC for a while, he's still more used to being on stage. As a professional dancer with a contemporary ballet company for more than two decades, Murell relates to actors as a director through movement.

"That's what I used as my foothold," he says.

Although he identifies with the play, Murell says that he knew nothing about opera and had to do a lot of research. He spoke to opera experts and watched videos of Callas per-

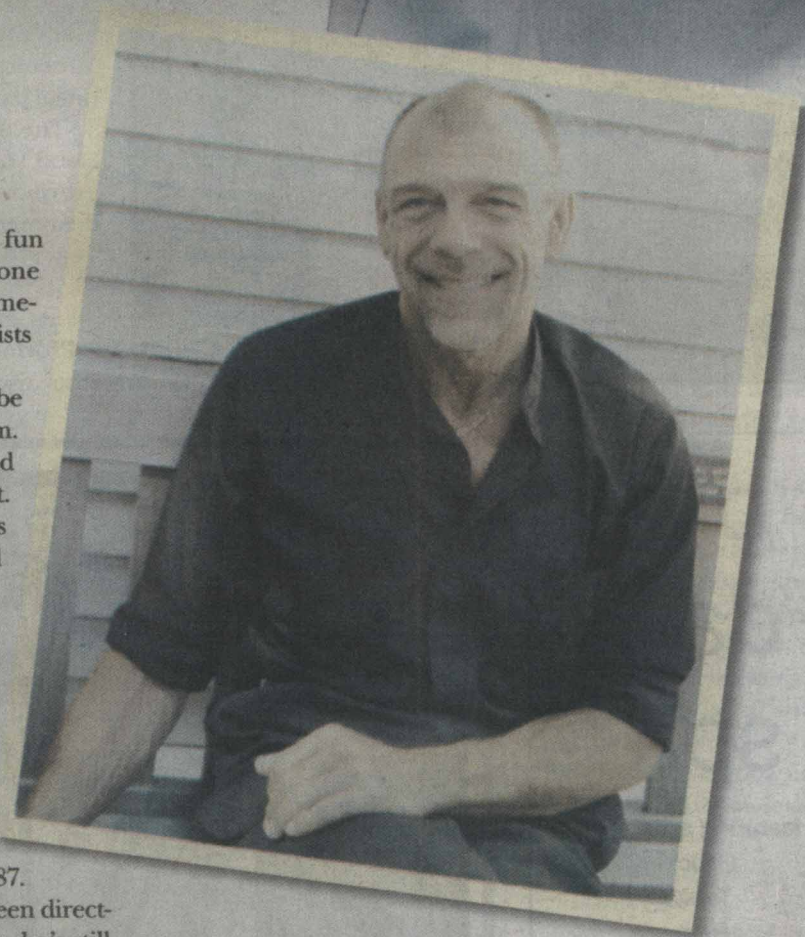


PHOTO ANN WOOD

Bart Murell, who directed "Hair" for the Provincetown Theatre Company, is now directing the Provincetown Rep production of "Master Class."

forming. Murell says that Callas "kind of changed the face of opera" in the way that she was able to connect the voice to the emotion through music.

"Master Class" won three Tonys in 1996, for best play, best actress and best featured actress. But Murell wants the direction of his Callas to differ a bit from the Broadway production.

Murell says that he read re-

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views from the original production of "Master Class" in which the actress who played Callas "played the bitch." He didn't want to do that; instead he wanted to focus on Callas's sensuality.

"If you choose to deal positively with adversity, it provides growth," Murell says. "I don't think she should be deified."

Murell opens the "Master Class" script and begins reading aloud. He stops, and thinks on it.

"This is what you really have to do to become an artist ... be

passionate about it and accept what comes your way," he says. "I guess you can do anything if you put your mind to it. That's what this play is about."

He's put his own mind to directing this play, and admits that, though he's a little nervous, it's all just part of the game. And, anyway, the production is ready for show.

"Nerves are always what you use," he says, adding that he told the actors they no longer need him. "The cast, they're all laughing at me because all I do [now] is sit there, [watch] and cry." □

'Master Class' hits high & low notes of diva's life

THEATER REVIEW

By Sue Harrison

BANNER STAFF

Opera has its fans and they are devoted sometimes to the point of fanaticism but most people just don't know that much about it. They probably can hum a few popular arias or can recognize the occasional singer like Luciano Pavarotti. Still, for almost everyone, the name Maria Callas summons up images of a dark, exotic diva with a colorful life who was to opera what Dolly Parton has been to country music; an icon, a legend, almost a goddess at risk of becoming a parody of herself.

Callas comes to life in Terrence McNally's "Master Class" and, like she did in real life, rules the stage every moment she is upon it. The casting of McNeely Myers as Callas is nothing short of perfection. Although she only casually resembles the late diva, she becomes her with total authority to the point where one can forget that there ever was another Maria Callas.

There are a few weak moments but overall this production by the Provincetown Repertory Theatre is a must see for its tight writing, strong direction, music and the tour de force performance by Myers. "Master Class" is performed in the sanctuary at the Universalist Meeting House, 236 Commercial St., at 8:30 p.m. nightly through Sept. 21.

The premise of the play—which won three Tonys for Best Actress, Best Featured Actress and Best Play—is a master class for opera singers that Callas is teaching. McNally witnessed one of the classes and saw the opportunity to put Callas' life story on the stage in context of the classes. Bart Murell directs and his background as a dancer is obvious in his physical staging, making the most of a simple and spare set.

In the opening scene, Callas' accompanist, Manny, played by John Thomas, enters first and takes his place at the piano. Myers as Callas follows. Callas is beyond her prime, her voice nearly broken from years of never holding anything back. As a teacher she is demanding and imperious but willing to help the young



The cast of "Master Class"—McNeely Myers (seated), John Thomas, Nell Snaidas, Mark Cortale and Bridget Murphy.

hopefuls if they are willing to risk as much as she did for the music. Most of them are not.

"I never missed a lesson, not once," Callas tells the audience, addressing them as if they were part of her class. "I never even came late.... You are its servant, the music."

She tells her students just how high the bar is before they ever step foot on the stage and makes it clear that they must measure up or be annihilated by her acid comments.

The dialogue is lively and kudlos to the playwright for a tightly written piece of theater. Myers' performance comes across as if

the part were written for her. She is witty, urbane, unforgiving and yet somehow retains the ability to become suddenly vulnerable when a student is willing to step out into the world.

As her running commentary on life, performance, opera, her fellow singers and the qualities that make an artist unfold, her life story gets revealed in little snippets. She demands to an off-stage stagehand (Ben Coppelman) that the house lights be dimmed, that a cushion be provided for her unsatisfactory chair and that water be provided immediately. "But it's not about me," she ends many of her soliloquies, while making it perfectly clear that it is all about her.

As the first student, Sophie di Palma played by Bridget Murphy, arrives on stage, Callas is appalled. "Get a look," she tells the girl. "It's easier than doing your scales," and launches into the story of her look and how she went from an overweight, often teased girl to the queen of La Scala.

As Sophie tries to sing her aria for class, she is constantly interrupted by Callas, who betates her further for her vocal failings.

"People don't leave their homes to hear us try, they come to hear us do," she tells the now-terrified young woman.

When Sophie has no pencil to make notes of the comments Callas gives her on her score, the diva is withering. "A pencil or an orange. It is always a choice," she says. "I always had a pencil and I love oranges."

Before long she brings Aristotle Onassis, her highly publicized lover, into the story.

"Ari says, 'They don't come to hear you, you are a freak. They come to see you.'" And Myers slips smoothly into the rough-spoken, sexually explicit Onassis. He is gross, he is rich and he is buying class with the acquisition of Callas.

Then Callas explains the aria to the girl. She steps over to the Meeting House pulpit and ups the dramatic ante as she pulls the audience into the passion and pain of the aria and ends the first act like gathering together the ends of a net.

It only gets more intense in act two, which finds her ridicul-

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