

# Maria: Legacy of la Divina [C1]

Angelina Jolie è in testa alla corsa per l'Oscar nel ruolo della mitica diva dell'opera Maria Callas in questo film intimo diretto dal regista cileno Pablo Larraín.

---

Angelina Jolie gives a **stunning** performance as opera singer Maria Callas in Pablo Larraín's movie *Maria*. The American-born Greek soprano, called La Divina by her fans, **rose to the heights** of her profession **against the odds**. Born in 1923 in the US, Callas **trained** at the Conservatory in Athens under Spanish soprano Elvira de Hidalgo. She became renowned for her bel canto technique, her **wide-ranging** emotive voice, and her dramatic interpretations. She was also quite robust, but began to be cast in leading roles in the mid 1950s after an extreme weight loss programme reduced her to her desired size, that of Audrey Hepburn.

## SCANDAL

Soon rumours began to circulate around the charismatic singer: her marriage of convenience to her manager Giovanni Battista Meneghini, her tendency to have **tantrums** and **storm out** of **rehearsals**, her complicated relationship with her mother, and her apparent rivalry with Italian opera star Renata Tibaldi. Callas was also having an affair with **shipping tycoon** Aristotle Onassis, who **ditched** her to marry political **widow** Jacqueline Kennedy.

## DECLINE

Callas began cancelling shows. She performed her last opera in 1965 at the age of just forty-one. By that time she was addicted to the sedative Mandrax, and her voice was in terrifying decline; a combined effect of poor technique, **overuse crash dieting** and, it is now believed, the autoimmune disease dermatomyositis. Callas **holed herself up** in a flat in Paris, seeing only her **maid** Bruna and her **butler** Ferruccio, who remained devoted to her until she died.

## THE MOVIE

Larraín centres his film on Callas' final years. As he explains, a defining moment was a disastrous public recital in 1974, after which Callas became a recluse. However, the film is not meant to dismay audiences, says Larraín, but to celebrate Callas' life and art. On its premiere at the Venice Film Festival last year, Maria was met with rapturous applause. After the screening, the director and stars gathered for an encounter with the press. The Chilean director began by talking about his interest in opera. **Pablo Larrain (Chilean accent):** I'm intrigued by the fact that there's [there are] almost no movies about opera singers. So I thought about making a movie about probably the greatest voice of [in] history, who had a very difficult life. Callas was so isolated from the world because of the public pressure, the state of her voice, the conflict with her blood family, with the entire planet. Culture creates the illusion of these people having these extraordinary lives. But then in reality, once you are inside doors, every soul has the same existential problems.

## PRIVATE LIFE

While there are many ways to interpret how Callas felt, Angelina Jolie's performance has been universally praised. The American actor was asked about her decision to play the part, especially as she herself has been out of the limelight for some time. **Angelina Jolie (American accent):** I've needed to be home more with my family and in that time I've become maybe more grateful to have the opportunity to just be an artist, to just be in this creative world that we are all fortunate to be in some way a part of. Opera's been in our house for a while, and I do hope that this film, if anything, brings more people to opera, to explore it and to let it affect them and move them because it's such a powerful art form. And to me, the immensity of the feeling encapsulated within the sounds of opera, there is nothing like it.

## FAMILY DRAMA

The film is about intimate relationships, not blood **relatives** in this case, but Callas' **reliance** on her **butler** Ferruccio Mezzadri and **maid** Bruna Lupoli, and their **reliance** on her. Scriptwriter Steven Knight says more. **Steven Knight (English accent)**: The relationship that's within that family, and it is a family, it's one lots of people are familiar with, it's where service and subordination becomes protection and defence. So in the end it wasn't an employer-employee situation, it was a **bond** of love between three people, and two people watching a third person disappearing, dissolving. It's something I think many people are familiar with in family situations. And just the fact that the central character was so extraordinary, had such an extraordinary **gift**, means that other people orbit around that person. It's not forced: it's an attraction.

## BEAM OF LIGHT

Pierfrancesco Favino plays the **butler** Ferruccio, who remained with Callas until her death. While the real Ferruccio is still alive, his character is fictionalised for the film, as Favino explains. **Pierfrancesco Favino (Italian accent)**: We decided not to refer directly to his life and to who he was, since the script was so clear. I think I understood a lot of things about the devotion he had for her and then we transformed it into what the movie needed. But I think that if you meet somebody as [like] Maria Callas, that gives you the possibility of getting a little **beam of that light**. My feeling is that their identity became what it was because they had the chance to meet her.

## TRAGIC DESTINY

Maria's story is told through **snippets** of opera and through flashbacks of **her younger self**, a role played by Aggelina Papadopoulou. While the film is not a musical, says Jolie, pieces have been selected to tell Callas' story through the great tragic heroines she played. **Angelina Jolie**: The pieces themselves really speak more than you realise about the moments in her life, and it's not accidental and it's not a distance. I think she became these

characters and she let these characters transform her. And I think in the end, these pieces of work become who she was. **Pablo Larraín:** Most of the stories that she sang, whether they were more into [in] the bel canto tradition or the Germanic tradition, they were tragedies. So there's something in there that Steve and I discussed extensively: how can we make a movie where the main character slowly becomes the sum of the tragedies that she sang? We didn't want to make a dark movie about a tragic situation. I think it's more like a movie where a woman that has spent her life singing for others, taking care of others, worrying about her relationships, now she's ready to take care of herself and find her own destiny.

---

# Glossary

- **wide-ranging** = ampio, variegato
- **tantrums** = capricci
- **shipping** = imbarcazioni
- **holed herself up** = rinchiudersi
- **maid** = domestica
- **butler** = maggiordomo
- **her younger self** = il suo io più giovane
- **storm out** = uscire furiosa
- **limelight** = centro dell'attenzione
- **praised** = lodare, elogiare
- **trained** = formarsi
- **crash dieting** = dieta drastica
- **snippets** = frammenti
- **rose to the heights** = raggiungere le vette
- **screening** = proiezione
- **blood family** = famiglia di sangue
- **grateful** = grata, riconoscente
- **reliance** = dipendenza
- **bond** = legame, vincolo
- **tycoon** = magnate
- **rapturous** = euforico
- **to play the part** = interpretare il ruolo
- **gift** = dono
- **stunning** = impressionante
- **rehearsals** = prove
- **ditched** = lasciare
- **widow** = vedova
- **overuse** = uso eccessivo
- **to dismay** = causare sgomento
- **relatives** = parenti
- **beam of that light** = raggio di luce
- **against the odds** = contro ogni previsione