

MASTER CLASS In the Room

Actor Anne Cullimore Decker, Director David Mong, and Accompanist Paul Dorgan discuss Salt Lake Acting Company's upcoming production of MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally with SLAC's Cynthia Fleming, Daisy Blake, Shannon Musgrave and Becky Santti.

In 1998, Salt Lake Acting Company first produced *MASTER CLASS*, directed by David Mong with Anne Cullimore Decker as Maria Callas.

CYNTHIA FLEMING to ANNE CULLIMORE DECKER. To begin, how did your reunion with this character happen? Could you recount your conversation with Nancy for us? You can even go back to eleven years ago.

ANNE CULLIMORE DECKER. (Dryly) Don't we have rehearsal at four? (Laughter) Oh my. Well, Nancy and I had lunch together, and she presented me with another script -- a one woman show -- that someone in this community said, "Anne should do this." And I was flattered that they would say that, but I said to Nancy, "Number 1, I'm not a fan of one-woman shows -- one-person shows, generally -- although we have had some good ones here at Salt Lake Acting Company, but I don't think that a particularly good script. I'd seen the show in New York, and I didn't think it was particularly good."

So Nancy said, "Well, what does appeal to you?"

And I said, "If you could find a script like *Master Class*..."

And she said, "Would you ever consider doing that again?"

And I said, "In a minute."

Never dreaming that it would become a reality. (Laughter) And you know Nancy!

She said, "Why?"

And I said, "She's in my bones."

(Quiet) It brought me back to after I had done *Master Class*, I had been to Rosanne... Who's the cook who's on KUER...? You know, she's the national cook...? Anyway --

DAVID MONG. You sound just like Callas. (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I was there, and somebody was there saying they had seen me in *Master Class*, and then we got talking, and I got teary just like I did now, and I thought, "My goodness, it's been that many years, and I still get teary about Maria?" And it made me realize how much she was in my bones. Now interestingly, we threw that one together pretty fast, didn't we David?

Mr. MONG. Yes ma'am.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Pre-tty fast. I was lucky to get the lines memorized and did not have time to do a lot of research on her to make decisions on choices, but we got it up, and we got through it. And so, as Nancy and I got talking, and I said, "Oh, it would be glorious to go back to that character. It would be just amazing."

Never thinking there would be a possibility of that happening.

Then I got a call from Nancy saying, "It's scheduled." (Laughing/Laughter)

"What's scheduled?"

(As Nancy) "*Master Class*. You said you wanted to do it."

"But I had no idea you would do it."

And she said, "Well, you want to, don't you?"

And I said, "How much time do I have? I'm not going to do another quickie."

And she said, "October."

And I said, "I can do that."

So I've been working, I've been reading, I've been researching, and I've been working on those lines that don't sound a bit familiar to what I did eleven years ago. (Laughing/Laughter) So!

Ms. FLEMING. What a treat! I do know -- when I performed in something, and then in four or five months -- or two years -- and you think, "Oh God, (simultaneously with Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER) if only I could do it again!"

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. -- absolutely --

Ms. FLEMING. -- bringing who I am and what I've learned.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. When I'd read the script, I'd think, "Oh my goodness, I don't remember saying that. Look what's underneath that!" It's a real privilege for me.

Ms. FLEMING. And a gift for us. The read thru -- I sat there and thought, "Oh, we could have sold \$100 tickets as a fundraiser!" The read thru was just so magnificent. David?

Mr. MONG. Madam?

Ms. FLEMING. Could you be an actor and recreate --

Mr. MONG. (Laughing) Could I be an actor? Look at my contract. (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING (Laughing) Could you recreate David Mong from that first read thru?

Mr. MONG. Well, that would have required that I listen to myself, which I don't normally do, but... One of the first things I have to say -- in fairness -- in candor -- is that I have virtually no experience with opera. I've had very little interest in it. I'm a Philistine when it comes to the operatic arts. And, as I said, my first experience with opera, my introduction to it, was Elmer Fudd in drag -- Brünnhilde singing, "Kill the wabbit, kill the wabbit..." (Laughter) which has stuck with me, and as I said, I'm about a block and a half from that now. (Laughter) So my knowledge, what little knowledge of opera I have, comes from the pop culture out there, and I always thought -- certainly years ago -- that it seemed a little silly to me. I changed my mind when I heard Maria Callas sing Lady Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth*. And my hair stood up on my head and arms, and I thought, "Wow. That's extraordinary."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fsOVCnE_WY

Thank God we have Mr. Paul Dorgan to guide us through the world of opera and music -- and he knows everything. I'm sure he'll talk later and tell us everything, every single thing. (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING to Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. So this was another meeting that you had with Paul?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Absolutely. They asked, "Who would be your first choice for a pianist?" And I said, "Well, if you can get Paul Dorgan, we would be set." And we got him!

Ms. FLEMING. Did you have to twist his arm?

PAUL DORGAN to Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. You did say it was payback time. (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I did, didn't I? (Laughter)

Mr. MONG. What did you have on him? There must be some interesting photos in your bureau...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (Laughing) No, we've had some wonderful opportunities -- Paul writes wonderful musical programs, and he's been nice enough to have needed a narrator and asked me to do it.

Mr. DORGAN. The first one was Shakespeare and other poets.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Oh yes!

Mr. MONG. And the fan dance. (Laughter) Do you remember that?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (Laughing) Oh, yes.

Mr. DORGAN. And then the second one was Christmas stuff --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. -- and then you did *Mad Women of Opera*, and I got to do --

Mr. DORGAN. -- oh yes, you got to do *Lady M* --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Which was *fun*. (Laughter) It was fun to get to do *Lady M*. I met Paul when we did *Master Class* eleven years ago.

Mr. DORGAN. I came to see [*Master Class*], and then sometime later, there was a party at somebody's house and you were there.

Ms. FLEMING to Mr. DORGAN. And were you a fan of Maria before?

Mr. DORGAN. Oh yes.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. You should see his studio.

Mr. DORGAN. It's a shrine. No, it's not a shrine... (Laughter) No, but I do have three great pictures of her.

Ms. FLEMING to Mr. DORGAN. So tell us who you are as you are new to SLAC.

Mr. DORGAN. Yes, I'm new to being on the stage side of theatre. (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. You're doing very well.

Mr. MONG. His acting debut.

Mr. DORGAN. Well, it's not my acting debut. There were some school shows.

Mr. MONG. I could tell. (Laughter)

Mr. DORGAN. Yes.

Mr. MONG. You were a grizzled vet.

Mr. DORGAN. Yes, yes... (Laughter) No, I'm a pianist and a vocal coach. I teach at the University, and I have always been interested in the theatre. The first show I remember seeing in the theatre was the D'Oyly Carte *The Gondoliers*, a Gilbert & Sullivan, and I guess -- I haven't been in since. (Laughing/Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. He is also the pianist for operas in Florida.

Mr. DORGAN. Yes. I've done my fair share of playing for various opera companies, and the only one I do now is a small opera company in Tampa -- because the conductor is this wonderful old man -- 92, I think.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. 92 and still conducting...

Ms. FLEMING. Wow...

Mr. DORGAN. He was in the children's chorus at the Met when the Met premiered *Turnadot*, so that was '27, '28...? And so, that's where his sort of tradition comes from. I remember one rehearsal for one production we did of *Trovatore*, and we had a musical read thru and we finished Act One, and he said, "Well, that's the way it goes, and anybody who doesn't agree with me doesn't know anything about Italian opera." (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. I love that!

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Don't tell David [Mong] that. (Laughter)

Mr. MONG. I'm mulling that now...

Ms. FLEMING to Mr. DORGAN. Are Stefanie Londino and Natalie Blackman your students or are you coaching them?

Mr. DORGAN. I coach both of them as a result of their casting.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. But you also should know that the time that Paul was supposed to go to the gig with this wonderful conductor was at the same time that we were here, so that was what was making me very nervous about his accepting this --

Mr. DORGAN. Well, originally I thought I would be able to do both, and then I checked the dates for Tampa, and they had shifted the production up two weeks, so it totally clashed...

Ms. FLEMING. So you had to choose?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. He did. Mr. PAUL DORGAN. I did.

Ms. FLEMING. Ohhh...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. So I had to remind him he owed me one. (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. (Laughing) Now he's going to start reminding you.

Mr. MONG to Mr. DORGAN. I'm going to have to be a lot nicer to you. (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING to Mr. MONG. David Mong, I was shocked to hear that *Master Class* was the first play you directed at SLAC.

Mr. MONG. I think that's right... Yeah, what a way to start, huh? (Laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. I know! It's just brilliant. And you've certainly done brilliant things since then, but what do you bring to *Master Class* now? Was there stuff that you wished that you had done differently...?

Mr. MONG. Well, again -- candor -- I don't *remember* (Laughter) the prior production. I really don't. It's actually kind of startling how little I remember of that other production, so we are tabula rasa to some extent; we are clean slates. We are discovering the thing all over again. I really do feel that, too, which is great because I've never actually directed a play *again*. This is my first time with that, and I really do feel I have a tremendous advantage that I have no recollection. (Laughing/laughter) When I heard Anne was interested in doing it and was willing to put up with me yet again --

Mr. DORGAN. Obviously she didn't remember the last production either. (Laughter)

Mr. MONG. (Laughing) I think it may be coming back to her now as we work through -- as we have our sessions of torture the tenor. (Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER laughs/laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. Another, for lack of a better word, upgrade from our last production is the piano. I understand that Rick Baldassin with Baldassin Pianos [www.baldassinpianos.com] is allowing us to use a \$40,000 piano.

Mr. MONG. Does that mean we have to cut the tap dance on top of that? (Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER laughs)

Mr. DORGAN. But we're still doing the strip tease --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I'm not going to be singing "Stormy Weather" on top of the piano. (Laughter)

Mr. DORGAN. But you could drape yourself artistically across it. (Laughing/laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. That is our \$100 -- \$200 -- ticket!

Mr. MONG. There you go.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. The lovely thing, too -- we went through three pianists before, and that took a huge amount of time -- *huge* amount of time, which just added to my terror because I needed all the time I could get.

DAISY BLAKE. You mean three during rehearsals?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. We had two during rehearsals, and then during the run, we had to fill in another one. It was terribly hard. Terribly hard.

Mr. DORGAN. Now we have three-in-one -- me, with my multiple personalities. (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. And also, Paul is our Italian -- our dialects coach, so that's wonderful. The only problem is that -- as you're out there on stage, struggling to remember your lines, you see his pencil come out to correct your pronunciation. (Laughter)

Mr. DORGAN. Just be glad that's all that comes out. (Laughter)

Mr. MONG. Yeah. As you can see, this is very delicate work; we are taking this very solidly, no giggles whatsoever.

Ms. FLEMING. What have you found in your Maria Callas research that our audiences might not know that we could share with them?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. One thing that comes to my mind, and I've come to believe it's a universal observation on celebrities -- I find celebrities, for the most part, live very tragic lives. When I retired from teaching at the University, I thought, "Oh, I get to read all of these books, I can hardly wait. Instead of reading scripts and theatre history and all that, I'll read books that I want." And I started reading biographies and autobiographies of famous people, and they were all so sad, so tragic. Well, Maria Callas' life is a tragic opera.

Mr. MONG. It certainly is. Mr. DORGAN. Definitely.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. People think -- all that fame, all that that glory, the people who still love her -- who are still buying her recordings more than any other vocal CD there is -- but a truly tragic life from the beginning, her birth to the end -- it's a heartbreaking story.

Mr. MONG. Her mother, when [Maria] was born, refused to see her -- for how many days?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I think seven.

Mr. MONG. Because she wanted a boy. They'd lost a son, an infant son, earlier in the marriage, and she was convinced it was going to be a boy, which is very important in the Greek culture.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. God was going to give her another son.

Mr. MONG. And here comes Maria -- and literally, her mother would not look at her or pick her up for an entire week.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. And that was the beginning of that relationship.

Mr. MONG. Yeah, (laughing) and it just got worse.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. They didn't file her birth certificate. They didn't register her birth certificate. She wasn't baptized until she was three years old. She had an older sister that was very beautiful, and the mother was pushing this sister, Jackie, to be something. The mother was living through her daughters. And then, when she finally realized that Maria was the one that had the voice, then she exploited her. Maria was very unattractive young girl: she was fat, she was clumsy, she wore thick glasses, she had bad acne. She had no friends, but she had this incredible instrument. So she didn't have a decent childhood. She was very lonely, very lonely.

Mr. MONG. And performing early on. Her mother took every opportunity to shove her out onto some kind of a stage to sing, and then took her to Greece when she was --?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Thirteen. Pulled her out of school. She was born in America to a Greek family. She moved to Greece with her mother and her sister. She didn't speak Greek, so that didn't help her with friends. All she did was just go to the Conservatory and take lessons -- and she would sit in the Conservatory and listen to her teacher give lessons to other people -- all day long. The other thing that I think has to be kept in mind is that she had no money.

[Giovanni Battista] Meneghini met her, and she wasn't an attractive woman, but he took her on. He was a wealthy Italian -- was he in the brick business?

Mr. DORGAN. I think so. Mr. MONG. His family had money.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. He provided money for her, and had it not been for Battista, who was 28 years older than she, maybe none of this would ever have happened.

Mr. MONG. Well, and what's interesting, too, is that she was separated from her father early on, and never was really able to re-establish a relationship, which is interesting in terms of her then becoming involved with older men all of her life.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. All the way through.

Mr. DORGAN. She was always looking for a father figure.

Mr. MONG. And I think one of the things that startled me the most -- and I don't remember this from working on this before (like so many things) -- the last years of her life she spent mostly in her Paris apartment, and the television was always on -- night and day. People would even come visit and would have to sit there with the television on --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (Laughing) And it wasn't public television...

Mr. MONG. She loved Westerns, and she loved detective stories. I think she loved things that were very clearly: there's good; there's bad. Very strong, simple --

Mr. DORGAN. -- Well, like opera plots.

Mr. MONG. Like opera plots. Absolutely.

Ms. FLEMING. How old was she when she died?

Mr. MONG. 53.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. 53...

Ms. FLEMING. There's controversy about her death?

Mr. MONG. Some people say heart attack, but she was also strung out on pills.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Sleeping pills.

Mr. MONG. Sleeping pills, and then they were giving her -- hello, Michael Jackson -- they were giving her pills then to rev her up in the day -- so, you know...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. There was one quote that I read where she said... "Thank God for every day because it's one less that I have to live through," or something like that. I wish I had the exact quote.

Ms. FLEMING. So how many years before she died was this master class?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. It was '71, and she died in '77. Six years.

Mr. MONG. And to put this time in context, which is clearer to me now than it ever was -- her career was pretty fallow by this point. Her voice was starting to go. I mean, she was having problems with her voice. Onassis had married Jackie Kennedy, and when that happened, she really did kind of seal herself off for quite a while.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She attempted suicide after that.

Mr. MONG. Well, rumor has it. This is why it's so clear she's a mythic figure, because you don't know for sure *what* to believe.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. -- The only thing on that I do, David -- and maybe I'm counting too much on it -- but John Ardoin [music critic and writer] says that he went to the American Hospital in Paris and saw her.

Mr. MONG. She definitely had a drug overdose, but the argument over whether or not that was an accident or intentional...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Right.

Mr. MONG. So she was not active -- in terms of her career -- for quite a while before this master class. And what's interesting to me, and a lot clearer this time, is that this was a way to re-enter the world for her, in a sense. It's a totally new thing; she'd never done this before, but -- it was an *audience*. And as so many of her friends say, she so desperately needed an audience again and their approval. But also, when she was about to do these master classes, she said to one of the International newspapers, "Opera is in crisis. I've been saying that since 1954. I don't want to let it die." And so part of why she was doing these classes is the obligation she felt to revitalize -- or vitalize -- the upcoming generation.

Mr. DORGAN. Pass on what she had learned.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Yes, yes...

Mr. MONG. But what's to me more interesting is that need for her to reconnect with an audience in whatever way she could. That's palpable in this play.

Mr. DORGAN. Oh yeah. But I think what you said earlier -- about her wanting approval, the approval of the audience -- would have been very, very important for her.

Mr. MONG. Absolutely. (Laughing) She enters the room and stops the applause. Sometimes we think it maybe just that she stops it before it becomes apparent that it wasn't long enough. (Laughter) She is a little bit of a fish out of water in this circumstance, too, which is interesting. I mean, she'd never taught before. She had no idea what it was about.

Ms. FLEMING. Never taught before --

Mr. MONG/Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER/Mr. DORGAN. No.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. And you sometimes see that happen; sometimes people that are the best performers really don't know how to teach it, and others that can't do the performing have an incredible skill of how to teach it.

Mr. DORGAN. Well, the master class situation is such an artificial thing because somebody with a name comes in and has 20 minutes or 30 minutes with somebody they've never met before. So what do you do? You can give them a few hints, but you can't start messing with

the technique, you can't go back to the basics, so what do you do? Some people are great at doing the sort of the 20 minute fix, and then there are people who are at a complete loss, and I think probably Callas felt very much at a loss.

Mr. MONG. Yeah, and they say her answer was almost always, "Here, just let me do it. I'll show you how it's done." (Laughter) You see that constantly in the play.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. DORGAN. And sometimes it is -- and certainly with her as a performer -- my God, I mean she was so electrifying.

Mr. MONG. Absolutely right. But I think the sense of where she was in her career and her life is interesting, too, in how McNally has used that -- because this is construction. This is a play that allows us to see the private and the public face of Maria Callas, and there's a simple device where at one point where we're in the room, and then, suddenly -- boom -- we're in her head, and she's remembering back. And all through this play, she's looking back, and I think what's interesting to me is that she was, actually personally, at a time where she was at sea -- and reflective. Looking back and wondering where's she's going to go from here -- and looking back and sort of reassessing her life -- and that comes flooding into the play, and it's very rich. So you have Maria Callas looking back, and all these young pup students just looking forward, and it's an interesting dynamic.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Another thing that strikes me as interesting about this, too, is that when these master classes were taught at Juilliard, the classroom wasn't filled just with singers. The public was coming out. Attorneys were leaving their offices to come and hear her.

Mr. MONG. Celebrities.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Celebrities were coming. They packed in -- standing room only to see her. They simply wanted to see her. And you can't help but feel that in her questioning of herself, "Do I really have it?" or "Was I ever really good?" was added upon because people were still revering her, and she knew she was losing her voice; she knew she'd lost the instrument that was once there. There's a tape I have of her singing one of her last concerts after master class -- and she wasn't good. She looks gorgeous, she just looks gorgeous, but she is not good. And they stand up and give her this incredible ovation -- and flowers coming to the stage -- which, for the moment, she's thinking "Oh good. Isn't this wonderful?" but in her head, she has to know --

Mr. MONG. And being the artist she was --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. "This isn't good. This isn't good."

Mr. MONG. This was, again, tragic. Absolutely tragic.

Mr. DORGAN. And the fact that they abandoned that tour. They never finished it.

Ms. FLEMING. Was the master class at Juilliard a series?

Mr. DORGAN. Yes, they went from something like October of '71 to March of '72 --

Mr. MONG. 26 students, and I think that she did them twice a week over a period of time. And I think that it's important to note that McNally has used that as a basis for the play because the

students -- well, I don't know if I should say this -- but I don't suspect the students were anywhere near as naive as these are, nor was Maria Callas quite as harsh and combative.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Absolutely not.

Mr. MONG. (Laughing) Nor did she ever just tweak away into Memory Land during the course of --

Mr. DORGAN. -- Not that we know of --

Mr. MONG. Not that we know of, but that's what makes it theatrical and funny -- extremely funny -- because these students are deer in the headlights -- essentially walking on stage with *Medea* or *Lady Macbeth*. (Laughing/laughter) It's very funny, and yet, some very tender moments as well, which I think is more true than the comic effect...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I've had some people say that they either didn't like the show or couldn't see it because McNally was so harsh on Callas, and so mean, and we know that McNally *adored* her.

Mr. MONG. Oh, absolutely.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Talk about a fan. So it would be interesting to know why he decided to make her as harsh as he did.

Mr. MONG. But, you know, she *was* tough.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She was tough, but she wasn't... But you get the laughs from her harshness.

Mr. MONG. Right, and that's what I mean. That's part of the comic structure of the play as well. But I think there's a certain amount of truth to that; she did not put up with foolish people.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Noooo.... She did not like people who didn't take the work seriously.

Mr. DORGAN. And then I think that's the basis for all the stories about her ferocious temperament.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Right.

Mr. MONG. Paul has a great story about her walking down to the lights...

Mr. DORGAN. When she made her debut at the Met, it was as Lucia. It was an old production; they never gave her a new production at the Met. So this was an old production, and she probably never even had a stage rehearsal, and in the sextet -- which is a frozen moment, when all the characters reflect on the situation -- a critic noted that at that moment five of the principals walked right downstage, completely out of the stage picture, walked right down to the footlights to sing the sextet, and the only person who stayed frozen in her own world was Callas.

Mr. MONG. (Laughing) The rest of them were going down to the lights.

Mr. DORGAN. Yes, to belt out the sextet and get an encore.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She was very disciplined.

Mr. MONG. I think it's a wonderful example of what Callas was about.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Another thing is that McNally has taken actual lines from the master class and used them in the play, so when you listen to the master class tapes, you think, "That's Maria saying exactly what McNally has used."

Ms. FLEMING. You can listen to the master class tapes?

Mr. DORGAN. They were available; I don't know if they are now.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. I have exclusive rights to them. (Laughter)

Mr. DORGAN. Maria left them to you in her will.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (Laughing) I got them eleven years ago -- I just didn't have time to listen to them.

Mr. MONG. You don't want to focus too much on those. We don't -- because this is a different animal to some extent.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. They're actually master classes, and you're hearing her interrupt these incredible voices -- they're fabulous voices... It shows what a master class is like, of how they do it. And the pianist is amazing; he knows when to stop, or when she's going to talk, or when to start in, and when she decides to show another example, he's right there.

Ms. FLEMING. So a great resource if people want to know more. (to Mr. DORGAN) When did you first hear Maria Callas, and why is she your all? (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Paul remembers where he was when she died.

Mr. DORGAN. Well, yeah, I was in London when she died, but that was comparatively recently. (Laughing) No, I remember my first reaction to Callas was recordings and thinking, "She's flat at the top; she's harsh." And then, after a while -- actually when I moved into opera, I suppose -- was when I got sense and realized what she was doing. Yes, the voice on many of the recordings -- the high notes are flat and kind of squally -- but that's three notes in a whole recording, in a whole opera. And what she does with the music is unbelievable. You look at the score, you follow along with the score, and she does everything that the composer asks for -- which a lot of other people do, too, but she's gone behind that and she's gone for the emotional content of what the composer was trying to get. And so you look at the score, and you go, "Oh, that's what that's for, that's what that means, that's what that means..."

Mr. MONG. She was a revolutionary artist. She really did change the face of opera. I understand that better now than I did eleven years ago. And apparently *hearing* her is one thing, *seeing* her is something else altogether.

Mr. DORGAN. They did televise Act II of *Tosca*. Actually, there were two: one that was done by the BBC, and then another one that was done in Paris. There is an incredible moment when Scarpia, the villain, has tried to rape her -- because she has come to plead for the life of her lover, and he finally agrees, and she finally agrees to go to bed with him, and he's writing a safe conduct so that they can meet, and she goes over to a table, and she picks up a glass of wine, and she sees the knife. And you think -- it feels like it takes her five minutes to put the glass down on the table. I know the opera so well, but every time I watch it I think, "Get that glass

down. You're never going to get through --" (Laughter)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ujwdfdc5ic0>

Mr. MONG. You're going to miss the music!

Mr. DORGAN. Yes! You're going to miss the cue! (Laughter)

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. But you watch the thought process in her -- her getting the idea --

Mr. DORGAN. Oh yes.

Mr. MONG. And that was the difference I think, with her. She really pulled it out of a -- God forgive me -- decorous art, to some extent, about pretty costumes and pretty singing -- and went down to the guts of what it was and brought the truth -- and the ugliness, at times.

Mr. DORGAN. Oh yes.

Mr. MONG. Which is why her voice was at times -- and it wasn't always accidental.

Mr. DORGAN. No, sometimes it was a very conscious choice. But there is a wonderful story -- and it's probably mythical, so --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (Laughing) There are a lot of those!

Mr. DORGAN. She was doing *Tosca*, sung in some sort of second-rate Italian opera house, and she was doing it with [Tito] Gobbi. They were sort of the big guests for the season, so they arrived in and needed rehearsal, and of course, she was basically blind up on stage. At the end of the second act, Scarpia is dead, she has put the candles down, she's put the cross on his chest, and she picks up her cape to leave and realizes that the set is all wallpapered -- because it's interior. She has no idea where the door is to get out. (Laughter) So, she drops everything, she rushes over to the body, picks the body up in an embrace, and says (As Callas, quiet, quickly), "Where the hell is the door?"

He says, "It's upstage center."

"Thanks." (Laughter)

And the papers the next day say, "Only Callas would even think of such an extraordinary dramatic moment!"

Mr. MONG. -- to go back to the body. (Laughing/laughter)

Ms. FLEMING. So Anne, had you read *Master Class* before or was it Nancy that brought it to you?

Ms. DECKER. No, I saw Zoe Caldwell do this in New York. I was on the way to Europe, and I wept watching her. The play was written for her. When McNally has Callas say, "I have short legs," and Callas was either 5'8" or 5'9", you want to say, "I don't think so." But Zoe Caldwell was short. It was written for her; he says it was written for her. I was just overwhelmed. I thought it was such a beautiful play and an incredible performance, and my husband said, "That's a role you should do." And I thought, "Wasn't that nice that my husband would think that?" (Laughing/laughter) So, I loved the play, and I loved the role. I loved everything about it, but then I was in Europe and Salt Lake Acting Company got the rights to do *Master Class*, and when I got back, and I heard they were doing it, I was so excited, and then I got the word at a cocktail party that night that the part had already been cast. And my heart sunk. I felt terrible, and I thought, "Well, that takes care of that. That was a nice idea." And then, (quietly) about three weeks later I got a phone call and that person -- felt that they couldn't do it.

Mr. MONG. I didn't remember that.

Ms. DECKER. So I was second choice! ... So it was one of those things where I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful?" And then the disappointment. And then the whole... And then interestingly because a lot of time had been lost with that, I said to Nancy, "I can't possibly get that role learned in that amount of time, and besides that, you're opening on my 40th wedding anniversary."

And Nancy said, (as Nancy) "Do you want to do it or not?" (Laughter)

Does that sound like Nancy? (as Nancy) "Do you want to do it or not?"

And I said, "Let me think about it." So I hung up the phone, and my son and his wife were there, and she's a director of theatre in Los Angeles, and I said, "There's no way I can do justice to that role in this short a time. I can't possibly do it."

And she said, "So Anne, there's never a perfect performance; that doesn't ever happen. So why don't you just be selfish, and do it anyway?"

And I thought, "Really?"

"So you don't do the perfect performance, but you want to do it, so be selfish. Do it anyway."

(Hushed tones) So I called Nancy back and said, "Okay!" (Laughter)

Ms. BLAKE. Why do you think that you say she's stayed in your bones? You've done so many roles, why her?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. That's a good question, Daisy. And you know, one reason -- number one -- is that she really existed, because another one that has stuck in my head is Camille Claudel that Aden [Ross] wrote. Two people that really existed and truly suffered. So when you're reading -- you do find when you're researching [Maria Callas], that you say, "Well, maybe that happened and maybe it didn't." Because there are a lot of different stories going around, and she had created some. She exaggerates and creates her own stories, but the fact that it isn't just a playwright's decision. She really existed, and the impact she had on the world -- because she changed opera. Before Callas, the way opera was being sung, I don't think I would have become the fan I am now. We want acting as well as singing; we want it all now, and she insisted upon that. I think because she truly existed and the impact she had on the world -- on the arts -- her commitment and her passion for the arts. And what showed that could happen to a person that could have been totally lost. She had a voice, and that was all. She didn't have support. She didn't have money. She didn't have confidence. She didn't have physical attractiveness. She could be one of those -- many people -- with a good vocal instrument, but she also had a commitment and a dedication to doing the very best she could, and we're so lucky! Because even now, she died thirty-two years ago Thursday, and still -- Maria Callas goes on and on. She could have just been lost.

Ms. FLEMING. Did she have a vocal and acting coach?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She gives credit to several, but she had one teacher for a brief time in Athens when she first got there, and then she went to Elvira de Hidalgo, who was her main teacher. She gives her credit for all of her singing, but she gives more of her credit to [Tullio] Serafin, who was the conductor who taught her how to act. He gave her instructions on how to act.

Mr. DORGAN. Well, it wasn't so much that he gave her instructions on how to act; he told her what was in the music, and that everything she needed was in the music. So when [Callas] tells Sophie -

Mr. MONG. "Listen..."

Mr. DORGAN. "Listen to the music. The music will tell you." That's what she got from Serafin.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. And that's a direct quote from Maria.

Ms. FLEMING. So, I'm sure these vocal coaches and conductors said the same thing to other singers, but she heard it.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She heard it.

Mr. DORGAN. But also, someone with Serafin's experience -- we were talking about this last night -- Serafin was in his seventies when Callas came along. He got it from composers, almost, but you learn that there are certain singers you can talk to about this stuff -- about what's in the music -- and you quickly learn that there are some singers who haven't a clue what you're trying to express.

Mr. MONG. Or the interest --

Mr. DORGAN. Or the interest. You know, they're just interested in making sure their high C is beautiful and that they're downstage of everybody else.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Which is I think is the situation of any form of teaching. I recall when teaching at the University you would keep pounding, and pounding, and pounding on a thing, and I can remember saying to students, "I'm not going to let you graduate until you get over this one habit. I'm not going to let you." I had one student, she went on to Juilliard, and she came back and said, "I just learned the most incredible thing," and it was *exactly* the thing. (Groans and laughter)

Mr. MONG. I guess you have to be ready to receive it.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. We all hear things at a different time.

Mr. MONG. And I think what's interesting about Maria Callas, too, is that she was so aware all the way along of that kind of tragic nature of her life as she was experiencing it. A lot of people have said -- her close personal friends -- there were any number of times in her life, including when she was married to Meneghini at one point, she would have been almost content to have a baby and just be a mother.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. She loved the idea of that.

Mr. MONG. And she really wanted a baby, all the way along.

Ms. BLAKE. And never had kids?

Mr. MONG. Well...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Well, that's now questionable. In the play, McNally had -- I hate to give this away -- but there is an issue. And now in this new biography that has come out they say she did have a baby, and it died --

Mr. MONG. The same day.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. But we do know she wanted a child very much. We have letters to Meneghini when she was away, and she wanted a child very much. And with Ari --

Mr. MONG. With [Aristotle] Onassis --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Onassis said, "If you have a child, I leave you." Who knows what would have happened if -- she would have had children, and we wouldn't have had...

Mr. MONG. So, in a strange way, a normal life was not completely available to her.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. One of the skills that McNally has with this, too, is that you see this celebrity who has all the signs of confidence -- *over* confidence -- she exudes confidence, but the vulnerability is there all the time. It will slip in when she's making demands or comments, and then will slip in her own insecurity, then when she goes into her head, you *really* see the vulnerability of this woman -- the insecurity --

Mr. MONG. Just naked.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Which I think brings the empathy that everybody feels, "Oh, how could she have felt that way? She's Maria Callas." She did, to the very end. So, don't aspire to be famous. (Laughter)

Mr. MONG. (Laughing) Or great at anything. The lesson here is --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Don't use that in your marketing. I'm just speaking to you. Enjoy the moment. Enjoy the day. (Laughing)

Mr. MONG. Well, it's the cost.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Yes.

Mr. MONG. It's the cost of pushing art forward.

Mr. DORGAN. And of course, what the public saw was either Callas onstage as a character or the public persona --

Mr. MONG. The Celebrity.

Mr. DORGAN. The Celebrity, and so that was just another role for her.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Yes.

Mr. DORGAN. She had tremendous confidence in what she did on the stage, and so being the Celebrity, she would have confidence in that. But take that away, and what does she have?

Mr. MONG. Well, that was the other thing that makes Maria Callas kind of unique and such a mythic character -- is her celebrity that expanded to the entirety of the pop culture because of Onassis and the connection with the Kennedys...

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Grace Kelly, Prince Ranier, Ingrid Bergman...

Mr. MONG. Oh absolutely. But for this country certainly, it was the Kennedy connection.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. You know, all at the beginning say how clumsy and awkward she was. Well, she's absolutely elegant. She learned -- where did she learn that?

Mr. MONG. Well, there was a metamorphosis.

Ms. CULLIMORE. Absolutely --

Mr. MONG. Suddenly --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Unbelievable.

Mr. MONG. It's in the play while she's in her head. "I'm thin." What does she say? "They say I'm like an Audrey Hepburn..."

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. (As Callas) "Another Audrey Hepburn, they're all saying. I like being beautiful."

Mr. MONG. And it's true, too, that she lost an enormous amount of weight --

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. 80 pounds.

Mr. MONG. -- in a very short time. And there's some speculation that that may have led to some of the problems with her voice, which I think is kind of a sad irony.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Well, her use of her voice though -- you can't -- She only had ten years of a good career. Ten years -- when you think about that. All this is happening in a ten year period where she was on top. The use of her voice -- the capacity -- and the different things that she sang that she really shouldn't have been singing for that voice, you can't help but feel that she could have damaged her voice.

Mr. MONG. She blew it out.

Mr. DORGAN. Well, I'm not so sure, because the heavy stuff that she was doing -- which is what will usually damages a voice was all at the beginning of her career. As soon as she could drop those roles, she did.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Then she did.

Mr. DORGAN. But I think weight loss may have had something to do with it, but Tito Gobbi, who sang along with her, said she basically lost confidence in her singing -- that she lost confidence in her breathing. And once the breath doesn't work anymore for a singer, that's it.

Mr. MONG. I think they called it the wobble. I'm not even sure if was a wobble --

Mr. DORGAN. Oh it is --

Mr. MONG. -- and she heard it and felt it, and began to kind of fix it, and it scared her to death.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Speaking of the two different sides of Maria, there is another side. Here she was, a celebrity and a personal person, but she never really had been -- she never knew herself as a sexual woman. She had been to Battista and loved him dearly -- the love letters she wrote him are incredible -- a lot of love letters. But then she met a fellow countryman --

Mr. MONG. But he was what, 35 years older than she was though?

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Who?

Mr. DORGAN/Mr. MONG. Meneghini.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. 28. 28 years older. Yes, exactly. I don't know how much older Ari [Aristotle Onassis] was, but there was a compatibility with them that they were both from the same country, but obviously they had an incredible sexual relationship -- her first. And [Ari] was part of the jet world, and so suddenly as she was beginning to lose her voice, she was suddenly moving out into the society and celebrity life. But there are pictures of her dancing at these wonderful galas, and she's got these gorgeous clothes, and her nails are beautiful and all that -- and she looks as bored -- (Laughter) she just looks bored. And when -- oh, who was it? Someone came to work with her again -- was it Zefferelli? He said, "You're not practicing your singing." And she said, "How do you know?" He said, "Look at your nails."

Mr. DORGAN. It was John Ardoin.

Ms. CULLIMORE DECKER. Was it John Ardoin? He said, "Look at your nails." Because she couldn't be accompanying herself with those beautiful long nails. And she said, "I've been discovering what it means to be a woman." She's a very complicated woman, and there's no set answer to what caused the voice loss, what caused a lot of things.

SLAC. Thank you!

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