Author recalls Callas' stormy life

By Richard Lech
staff writer

...Opera diva Maria Callas was the ugly duckling who became the beautiful swan.

Yet Callas continued to think of herself as that ugly duckling even when she had become one of the most glamorous women in the world, said her biographer, Arianna Stassinopoulos.

"In her own mind she went on seeing herself as she had once been, as a dowdy teen-ager," Stassinopoulos told a Livonia Town Hall audience.

"She never got in touch with her own greatness as a human being, although she knew she was a great singer. That is her tragedy. She did not have much awareness of herself as a woman and human being."

Arianna Stassinopoulos

STASSINOPOULOS WROTE her best-selling biography "Maria Callas, the Woman Behind the Legend" four years ago. Yet Callas remains very much with her, she said.

"Just today I signed the rights to Joan Collins, so Joan Collins is going to play Maria Callas in a mini-series," Stassinopoulos said. "What is wonderful is she is absolutely fascinated by her.

"She sees a great opportunity to go beyond the roles she's played before to play a woman in all her dimensions."

Born in Greece and educated at Cambridge University in England, Stassinopoulos wrote her first book, "The Female Woman," in 1972 when she was 22.

A best seller in England, the book was an attempt to set up some middle ground between extreme feminism and "The Total Woman" mentality, she said. She followed that with other works, including a book called "The Gods of Greece."

A U.S. resident for five years, Stassinopoulos once was linked romantically with ex-California governor Jerry Brown and counts among her friends Dr. Jonas Salk and AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland.

RECENTLY, SHE did a series of six television interviews with Brown, Salk, Coretta King, actress Ellen Burstyn and others.

Her latest project is writing the official biography of Picasso.

"The book is not going to be so much on how he's going to be remembered by future generations, although of course he's going to be remembered as the greatest painter of the 20th century and a genius," she said.

"What interests me more is the man, and the sources of his creativity, the sources of the tension inside him."

The night before her Town Hall appearance, Stassinopoulos had dinner with Picasso's former mistress, Francoise Gilot. Gilot had lived with the painter for 12 years and was "the only woman who ever left him."

Stassinopoulos said she was impressed that Gilot, an artist in her own right, had her own sense of "what's important in life," independent of Picasso's.

"I find it very important for each person to have their own sense of what life is about."

CALLAS DID not have such an independent sense of life, however. She became wrapped up in somebody else in the world."

Callas sacrificed one of her lifelong dreams — to have a child — to Onassis' wishes, Stassinopoulos said. When Callas became pregnant at age 43, Onassis told her to have an abortion or it would be the end of their relationship, Stassinopoulos says in her book.

"The story of Maria Callas' abortion was the saddest part of her life for me because she so longed to have a child.

"Ironically, the tests showed the baby was going to be a boy, and Onassis lost his only son in that plane crash."

But Stassinopoulos said she did not consider Callas to have been Onassis' victim.

"In the end we can't be victimized by someone unless we allow ourselves to be victimized."

ONASSIS HAD a certain zest for life, and it was this that attracted Jacqueline Kennedy to him, Stassinopoulos said.

"I don't think it was a marriage just for money, because there were a lot richer men. Whatever his faults, he had a certain passion for life."

To write her Callas book, Stassinopoulos interviewed "hundreds" of people, listened to spoken tape recordings Callas had left behind after her death in 1977, and read hundreds of the opera star's letters.

"At the same time, you have to allow your own intuition to give the material some living reality."

Having studied Callas and written about her, Stassinopoulos said she feels very close to the singer — although they only met once, and that was briefly. When Stassinopoulos was 10 years old her mother took her backstage to meet Callas after a performance of "Norma."

"I asked her for her autograph, and I never did that before with anybody."

The best recordings of Callas' music are the live performances, where the actress in her could respond to the audience, Stassinopoulos said.

"She didn't have a perfect voice, but she had a dramatic voice."

Stassinopoulos' lecture focused on her own formula for mastering the art of living. She advised working to understand and coordinate the various "personalities" within the mind.

Greek mythology was such an attempt, with each God a counterpart to some aspect of the human personality, she said.

"I wanted to write 'The Gods of Greece' because so far Greek mythology has been approached as something that's dead. I wanted to show it's something that's alive today."

"Nothing in Greek mythology is trivial. Everything has a reason for being there."

About chelation therapy

gerontology

A. Jolayne Farrell

Dear Jo:

My husband and I are wondering how we can find out more about chelation therapy.I realize that a great deal of controlled scientific research has to be done on this type of therapy before it is recognized as an acceptable treatment for certain conditions such as hardening of the arteries.I would appreciate it if you would recommend some substantial readings on this subject.

Mrs. B.M.

Dear Mrs. M.:

I selected your letter from the many I received on the controversial chelation therapy because you have taken the best approach — a request for more information. Most of the letters simply asked for the name and address of the nearest clinic so they could seek out this treatment.

Chelation therapy is a course of treatment consisting of 30 to 40 sessions in which the chemical EDTA (Ethylenediametetraacetate) is given intravenously. Some say the treatments improve memory, reverse blindness, open blocked arteries, dissolve kidney stones and reduce arthritis symtoms. Some even claim that it is an anti-aging drug.

The use of this chemical has only been approved by the medical society in the treatment of heavy-metal poisoning. Apparently it binds with the metal and eliminates it through the kidneys.

Supporters of chelation therapy theorize that EDTA binds to the calcium that clogs the blood vessels and with its elimination, the blood flows more freely, often producing dramatic results. It does not act on cholesterol.

At this time, there is no credible scientific evidence that chelation therapy works, while there are many sound reasons to suspect that it is an expensive, elaborate and perhaps dangerous placebo.

As a health care professional, I do not advocate chelation therapy.

To get accurate information, I recommend that you ask your doctor. To find out what has been written by experts, I suggest that you go to a health science library associated with a medical school. Beware of books on the newstands that promote dubious questionable therapy as they are often written by persons who are not qualified and are often based on unscientific research.

Two recommended articles are: "Chelation Clinics: An Abuse of the Physician's Freedom of Choice" by A. Soffer in the August 1984 medical journal, "Chest: The Cardiopulmonary Journal" and "Chelation Therapy: A Second Look" by the editors of The Harvard Medical School Health Letter, July 1984.

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