

PETIT DRAGON, ELEPHANT DOC & VOLF PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

MARIA CALLAS

by

In her own words

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY
TOM VOLF



mk2
films

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MARIA BY CALLAS IN HER OWN WORDS

Callas in her own words: for the first time

Finally, 40 years after her death, and for the very first time, the most famous opera singer in history, Maria Callas, is about to tell her own story – in her own words.

There will be no talking heads, in the form of specialists or those close to her. Instead, Callas' own voice will tell us about herself through interviews (many of which have never been released, or will be rediscovered) and rare letters sent to her friends and family, her love letters to her first husband, as well as to Aristotle Onassis. For the French version, the voice of actress Fanny Ardant will breathe life into La Diva's words. For the English and Italian versions, actresses have yet to be confirmed.

A landmark film for the 40th anniversary of her death.

For three years, director Tom Volf travelled to all four corners of the world to find exceptional archives, most of which have never been released: private films on Super 8, 16mm, unpublished photos, bootleg recordings of her performances by admirers, intimate letters, or lost interviews.

Thanks to Tom Volf, this incredible material will give rise to a grand exhibition in Paris, from September to December 2017 (pre-sold in New York, London, and in discussion with Asian countries for 2018), and three books: a deluxe version by Editions Assouline, *Maria By Callas* (released worldwide in May 2017), another book by Editions La Martinière, *Callas confidential*, and a third with Éditions Fayard, which is publishing her unreleased correspondence and memoirs in Maria Callas, mémoires, lettres et écrits. These last two books will be released in September 2017.

The soundtrack will be made up of rare or unreleased recordings taken from remastered tapes obtained through Callas' close relations and circles of admirers. No other film will present such a rich collection of images and sound archives, over 50% of which will be seen or heard here for the first time.

A colour film for movie theatres

Since Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* in 1969, this will be La Divina's comeback to the big screen! This documentary will take the opera singer out of television. Three prestigious actresses will lend their voices to Maria Callas' most intimate words. In France, it will be Fanny Ardant, who embodied Callas so perfectly for the stage in *Master Class*, then for the big screen in *Callas Forever*; discussions are currently taking place for two prestigious actresses for the English and Italian voices.

To renew Maria Callas' image and ensure this documentary interests all generations – young people, in particular – the film will be nearly entirely in colour. In addition to the unreleased archives, the more iconic archives, often in black and white, will be colourized and restored for the first time in HD.

Given the ambitious scope of any film featuring such an international star, Tom Volf has partly based his choices by looking to documentaries like *AMY*, released theatrically in 2015 (and premiering at the Cannes Film Festival), as well as *Ingrid Bergman in Her Own Words*, also released in 2015. Maria Callas' continued popularity remains rare for a figure from the world of classical music, making her the equivalent of a pop star or a great actress in the eyes of the general public.

A film shedding new light: Maria versus Callas

To this day, Maria Callas remains one of the greatest selling classical music artists in the world, and the most appreciated for the emotion she conveys through her singing: her Facebook page has received over 600,000 likes. And yet, we know very little about the true Maria behind "La Callas." All her life, she felt misunderstood.

Who was Maria Callas, truly? We know the Voice of the Century, the Diva of magazine covers and scandals, the jet-set public persona... Her extraordinary life reads like a novel or a tragic opera. But Tom Volf's film will reveal a completely different side of her: it will showcase the conflict between two personalities, one that wanted planetary fame, and the other that dreamed of a simple life: Maria and Callas.

We will discover a fragile Maria, a lonely Maria, juxtaposed with "La Callas" who surrounded herself with the greats: Visconti, Pasolini, Onassis, Churchill, Marilyn, Grace Kelly, Prince Rainier, F. Zeffirelli, Alain Delon, Yves Saint-Laurent, Pierre Bergé, Kennedy, Liz Taylor... We will hear from the secret Maria, with her dreams of starting a family and living far from the stage and high-society parties, as opposed to a relentless Callas, who pushes her limits in the hopes of making a comeback, despite the damage her voice has sustained after such an extraordinary career, before finally dying in Paris at just 53 years of age. Beyond this conflict, where one side eventually capitulates to the other, Tom Volf's film tries to reconcile Maria and Callas.

Synopsis of film

The film begins in 1974 with unreleased interviews made three years before her death. Maria Callas discusses the way in which she revolutionized opera, but also her regrets – namely, of never having started a family. Callas, who became La Diva, forces the young Maria to give up her desires for a normal life.

Even her childhood is extraordinary. **“I came into this world in New York City, under the sign of Sagittarius, the morning of December 2nd or 4th...”** as Maria Callas tells us in her unfinished memoirs. **Callas then remembers the little Maria, an unloved child pushed into singing by her mother.** This woman fulfills her own failed artistic ambitions by living vicariously through her daughter’s budding talent. Although her background is Greek, Maria spends her first years in New York, with separated parents. Her mother takes her two daughters to live in Greece in 1937. Maria lives a penniless life while training her dramatic soprano voice at the Athens Conservatoire, in Elvira de Hildago’s class: a decisive encounter for her career. She goes on to sing different roles at the opera to support her family.

After the Liberation, Maria grows distant from her mother and moves to New York: she dreams of a career at the Metropolitan Opera. She fails. She finds her first real work in Italy. Upon arriving in 1947, she meets an industrialist 28 years her senior, who becomes her husband in 1949. Another key encounter is when she meets the conductor, Tullio Serafin, who offers her her first real roles. From that moment on, nothing can stop her rise to the top.

This is followed by her own account of her growing success in Italy, in South America, then in the USA, and in France. In 1953 and 1954, she even transforms physically: from a portly woman, her figure is now slender, attracting fashion designers like YSL.

The press begins to comment as much about her private life as her performances. **Maria gives herself up entirely to her art and fades away to La Callas’ advantage.** Uncompromising, passionate and majestic, she makes headlines with her “tantrums”: cancellations, outrageous demands, mood swings, fits of anger... **offering us her personal vision of that era,** between physical suffering, unfair accusations, her excessive demands regarding the venues and audience. **Because Callas is subjected to the pressures generated by her status as an icon: “the more Maria becomes Callas, the more scared she is... Medea was never scared, but Maria definitely was...”**

To the point where, in 1959, she begins to turn away from the stage, even though Maria is falling in love with billionaire businessman and Don Juan: Aristotle Onassis. A downward spiral that will drag the artist towards a slow decline – and the woman towards destructive passion. After a brief detour through the movies, and a final tour, where her voice is nothing more than a shadow of its former self, Callas’ story ends in 1976, in an empty Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, during her final attempt at a comeback that will never take place. **Maria Callas becomes a shut-in, alone, dying at age 53 in her Paris apartment.**

Her unpublished correspondence, covering her transformation from the young Maria to the “La Callas” of her final years, serves as a common thread for the story, along with rare interviews, some of which have been forgotten, and passages from her unpublished memoirs. Callas’ words thus offer an account of her life as seen from inside, providing a glimpse behind the scenes of her rise and the secrets of her tragic destiny.





Expanded synopsis

Act I. Birth of a Diva

1974 – In an unaired interview for Japanese television, three years before her death, Maria Callas explains how she revolutionized opera.

Another unseen interview (with Barbara Walters on CBS), made during the same period, in which **she expresses her regret of never having a child or family life, which was the only thing of any importance in her view, and for which she would have gladly given up her career.**

New York / Athens / New York

We hear a passage from Callas' unfinished autobiography: "I came into this world in New York, under the sign of Sagittarius, on the morning of December 2nd or 4th..." 1923, from modest origins, and Greek parents who had just emigrated to the US.

Callas tells us about her beautiful adored sister – while she is an unwanted child her mother finds ugly. This mother pays little attention to her, until she notices her daughter's particular voice. She suddenly sees an opportunity to get revenge on a life filled with disappointment, and step into the limelight.

"I would occasionally sing for fun, but I would never have imagined doing it professionally. And don't think I would have wanted to..." The young Maria – who would prefer to have an ordinary childhood instead of developing her gift – nevertheless sees an opportunity to be loved by her mother and consents to her will: arduous work, singing lessons, and a competition for young talent.

Her childhood is literally stolen from her, says Callas. She slowly realizes that, in fact, nothing will make her mother love her. **"She pushed me! To the point of making me lie about my age to get into the conservatoire at age 13...."** This is the beginning of a painful relationship that will resurface throughout La Diva's life. On a whim, her mother decides to leave her husband and return to Greece with her two daughters. Maria has no choice: she leaves the only country she's ever known, and a father she adores.

On screen, we see a series of photos of Maria as a child in New York with her parents, then as a teenager in Greece with her mother during the war, then taking her first steps at the National Opera in Athens, in Fidelio and Tosca.

The three women arrive in Athens just before WWII breaks out. This is the beginning of a harsh period, where the young Maria must perform laborious chores, travel across the city to find bread, and then help her mother, who does not have enough to provide for her family.

On top of this, Maria is recruited by British secret agents: "I had to deliver messages to the Resistance...."

Through interviews, Callas tells about her departure for Athens, the war, and meeting Elvira de Hidalgo, which marks the beginning of her first career in Greece. De Hidalgo was a diva from the Caruso generation, and accidentally happens to be in Athens during the war. Unable to leave the country, she decides to teach singing at the Conservatoire. Not only will she quickly become Maria's mentor, but she will also be the loving mother she never had. De Hidalgo quickly spots the young girl's talent and, more particularly, her gift for acting on stage and her dramatic interpretations of characters. **"She played an essential role in my life..." says Callas.**

For Maria, this is her only chance to be trained in the forgotten tradition of Bel Canto: a singing style with extreme vocal techniques derived from 18th and 19th century Italian composers, the same composers who wrote the majority of the operas Callas performed throughout her career: *Norma*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Anna Bolena*, *Traviata*, and more.

"At the time, I studied and practised in the pure style of Bel Canto." This is how the war years are spent: between singing classes and her first performances on stage at the National Greek Opera in Athens, in particular *Cavaleria Rusticana*, *Tosca*, and *Fidelio*. She then follows Elvira's advice to learn Italian, **"It will be useful, she told me, because sooner or later, you'll be going to Italy. That's where you'll truly be able to begin your career... For me, that sounded like going to the Moon."**

1945. The war is over, as well as the young singer's training. Maria leaves her asphyxiating mother, who is suspected of collaborating with the enemy. She then leaves for America – against Elvira's advice, who recommends going to Italy to start her career outside of Greece.

The young woman cannot resist the desire to return to her hometown and try her shot at the Metropolitan Opera – a dream she has clung to for years. Her mother refuses to accept her departure. **"My mother and sister refused to accompany me to the port... and my father didn't even know I was coming because my mother wouldn't tell him."**

Photos of Maria during her return to New York.

After a never-ending journey by boat, her father – who had been told of her arrival by a close relation – welcomes her. **"You will see for yourself, as my story continues, that the hand of God has always been over my head in the most dramatic moments of my life."**

1946. After many long months of waiting (since "no one over there knew the poor little Greek girl") Maria finally manages to get an audition at the "Met." But she is offered two ill-fitting roles: *Madame Butterfly*, which Maria refuses, since she is overweight and does not want to look ridiculous by playing the character of a young, seductive geisha; then *Fidelio*, which she knows quite well. Nevertheless, she is forced to sing an English translation of it, which she also refuses, since she only wants to sing in Italian.

Letter from Maria to Madame De Hidalgo dating back to 1946, where she confesses her misadventures in America – and yet, restates her unshaken determination to continue.

She lands other auditions, but gets none of the parts **"They would always tell me, "you're so young... what guarantee do we have...? Have a career in Italy first, then we'll hire you."**

In 1947, Maria Callas rashly signs a contract with the impresario Bagarozzy, naming him her "sole personal representative," to whom she has to hand over 10% of any money she makes. He would pull out this contract seven years later, once Maria Callas had become a star...

In the end, Italy extends its hand to her in the form of an audition with the impresario of the Verona Arena, who is visiting the US at the time. She is hired and climbs aboard a transatlantic cargo ship towards her future adopted country.

Photos of Maria on the boat to Italy.

Interviews where Callas tells about her failed audition at the "Met" and her departure for Italy.

Passage from Callas' unfinished memoirs: "I didn't have the slightest idea where to even find this city, which has now become so dear to me. I left without a dime in my pocket, but I had a massive trunk filled with the hope and incredible joy of someone who, almost frightened, is watching an impossible dream come true."

From Verona to Milan

Verona becomes a decisive city in her life. The place where she begins her "great career" and where she will meet her husband. **"There, twenty-four hours after setting foot on Italian soil, I met the man who would become my future husband."**

Photos of Maria during her first days in Verona, and with her future husband, showing her around Venice (private collection).

Music: aria from Gioconda "Suicido", live in Torino, 1951

She sings in Gioconda which, despite a difficult start and a sprained ankle, is a success: **"I've always paid a high price for my successes...." But this role does not immediately open the gates of glory. Italian opera houses are cautious to hire this young lady with her incredibly singular style. "I had a voice that people were unaccustomed to, and they didn't take to me right away."**

Interviews with Callas where she discusses her arrival in Verona, meeting her future husband, her first steps in the Arena, her difficulty finding work, and her decisive encounter with Tullio Serafin in Verona. (1969 Lord Harewood - 1970 David Frost - 1968 L'invité du dimanche - radio: 1967 E. Downes)

Aria from Tristan und Isolde "Dolce e calmo" Cetra 1949

Serafin spots the young opera singer's talent and calls her back a few months later to hire her for Tristan und Isolde at La Fenice. "I left for Venice with Battista, and that's where our love was born...."

But this is still not success she was expecting. Maria then drifts from one small provincial opera house to another with Tristan, and is eventually called back to Venice by Serafin the following year. **It is precisely here, in early 1949, that "destiny" would come knocking at her door.** Although she is singing in Die Walküre – another Wagnerian role, conducted by Maestro Serafin – the soprano, who was singing a completely different role every other night in Bellini's I puritani, falls ill.

*Interviews with Callas telling the story of the I puritani episode in Venice (1969 Lord Harewood - radio: 1965 M. Banzet): "I was in the hotel lobby with Serafin's wife when we heard the news. I automatically sat down at the piano with the sheet music to hum some of the arias. Mrs. Serafin got up from her chair and said, "When Tullio arrives, sing that for him." I thought she was joking and said, "Sure, sure." The next morning, the phone rang, waking me up. Maestro Serafin asked me to come down immediately. I didn't even have time to take a shower and, wearing just a bathrobe, still half-asleep, I come down to find an entire group of people around Serafin, all in unison, demanding me to sing the aria from I puritani I'd hummed the night before. I looked at them with my haggard face – I swear, they all looked completely crazy to me. I finally gave in and they instantly asked me to fill in for her. There were only six days left, and I didn't know the opera by heart. On top of that, I still had to continue singing in Die Walküre every other night. **To this day, I still can't believe it, but we did it. I was really well-received by the public, and I followed it up with other roles."***

She also relates the hard luck of singing in tiny provincial opera houses, where she is accommodated in **"maid's rooms without water or heating."** Despite her growing success, and increasingly important opera houses bringing her closer

to the Holy Grail of La Scala – more than anything else, Maria is looking to find **“the warmth of a home and the quiet that all women find in a happy marriage.”** In Callas’ letters, read by Fanny Ardant, to her husband, Battista Meneghini, we hear many words of love and devotion: **“My dearest love... I am yours, body and soul...”**

But her ambition is her priority. Letters, read by Fanny Ardant, to Elvira De Hidalgo about her early days in Italy, Callas writes, **“...if all goes according to plan, our hopes will become a reality, and I’ll become the queen of Bel Canto!”**

In this letter, she also talks about meeting her husband and announces their marriage. Battista is 28 years her senior. Finally, in 1949, just as Maria is getting ready for her tour of South America, they decide to get married.

Passages from Callas’ unfinished autobiography

Photos of Maria’s and Battista’s marriage (private collection)

“I preferred having Maria Meneghini on my passport instead of Maria Callas.” It was a modest marriage in a tiny church in Verona. Only Battista’s daughter and a few friends are present: **“no presents, no flowers, only great love and great simplicity. That same afternoon, I boarded a boat for Buenos Aires.”**

Photos Maria sent Meneghini of her trip on a cargo ship, from South America.

Handwritten notes on the backs of photos (private collection)

Aria from Nabucco - Live in Naples, 1949

Aria from Aida with the legendary high-pitched note – 1951

Back in Argentina, and despite a few contracts in Italy, including her famous Nabucco in Naples, Aida and Turco in Rome (where she made the third-most important encounter of her life: Luchino Visconti), people are not lining up to offer her new roles. **Callas decides to accept a contract where she will sing in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico for two seasons, in 1951 and 1952. She will try her hand at roles that would later become part of her signature repertoire in the coming years: “Norma”. “Traviata”, “Lucia.”**

Interview on Mexican radio in 1952. This is the very first time we hear the young Callas’ speaking voice.

Passages from Callas’ unfinished autobiography

Aria from Rigoletto “Caro nome” 1952

This is also the only place where she will ever sing in Rigoletto (we hear an unreleased recording) and also where she will have her first publicity photos made: we see a series of unpublished photos showing a plump young lady in old-fashioned clothes, miles away from the image of the Diva she will later become.

Photos of Callas in different roles on stage in Mexico and in the photo shoot from the Semo series.

Finally, in Mexico, for the very first time, she sings with two partners that will go on to accompany her throughout her career: Giulietta Simionnato and, in particular, Giuseppe Di Stefano – with whom she performed her farewell tour in 1973-74.

Interview with Callas speaking about her colleagues: “they were sometimes jealous and didn’t understand why I was given all these roles” ((radio: 1965 M. Banzet and radio: 1958 Fleetwood)

Mexico is also where she sees her mother for the last time. Their relationship has worsened and her mother tries to take advantage of her daughter’s growing career.

Interview between Callas and her father discussing her problematic mother-daughter relationship (TV: Gardner 1958 - BBC); and Interview with Callas explaining why she burned bridges with her mother (TV: Mike Wallace 1974 - CBS): “She blackmailed me... she said that if I didn’t give her money, she would speak ill of me to the press... which she did.”

1952 is a banner year, when Callas takes her first steps in Covent Garden in

Norma – we play recordings and show previously unreleased photos – and she leaves her indelible mark on the role when she performs it in Trieste, making it the first time it has been sung in Italy for decades.

Photos and audio recordings of Norma in London, 1952.

Letters to De Hidalgo: "I will finally sing Norma, which I've prepared for so long..."

In late 1952, she makes her triumphant debut when she opens the new season of La Scala with Verdi's Macbeth – we hear an unpublished recording. Passages from Callas' unfinished autobiography: "Maestro Toscanini had never found anyone who could embody the true Lady Macbeth."

Aria from Macbeth, live from La Scala, 1952.

Photos of Callas on stage in Macbeth..

Act II.

The transformation and the glory

Physical metamorphosis

"I was tired of singing roles of young, pretty girls, when I was heavysset... I've always looked for precision, musically-speaking. It was time I did the same thing with my body..." *Interviews with Callas speaking about her weight loss (radio: 1965 M. Banzet - radio: 1967 E. Downes)*

On the advice of her friend and Pygmalion, Luchino Visconti, Callas goes on a diet and, within a matter of months, sheds 40 kg (approx. 90 lbs). Her figure is suddenly svelte. She soon meets Italian fashion designer, Biki, who opens the doors of the fashion world for her and creates the Callas style.

Photos of her rapid weight loss and films of Callas with her 1950s figure.

When she returns to La Scala the following year, she is virtually beyond recognition and makes her début in Visconti's very first show for her: La Vestale.

Aria from La Vestale "Tu cheinvoco" live at La Scala 1954, or live in concert, 1958.

Behind-the-scenes report during La Vestale.

"I became the Primadonna, and he was the gentleman who spoiled me. And I took full advantage of it... Visconti taught me one thing, without realizing it: the less I moved on stage, the more my movements were precise regarding the character..."

Interview with Callas on her early days with Visconti (1968 "L'invité du dimanche" - 1969 documentary on Visconti, Man of Three Worlds, BBC)

Radio interview with Callas on the night of the premiere (radio: Emilio Pozzi - RAI)

International triumph – and its cost

The Callas-Meneghini couple decides to move to Milan. 1955 will be the year of all triumphs, launching Callas to worldwide stardom, thanks to her unanimous successes in the world's greatest opera houses.

Film of Callas in her apartment, trying on different outfits, reading books, playing piano. (RAI)

Overture or interlude of La Traviata

Interview with Callas about 1955: "The memory of that Traviata will remain dear to my memory, probably more than all the rest..." (radio: June 23, 1955 – RAI)

First of all, it would be the year of La Scala, with two new productions by Visconti: the legendary Traviata, and a sublime Somnambula, a role she inaugurates.

Photos of La Traviata and Sonnambula from La Scala

Interviews of Callas on La Scala years, her roles, her relationship to Visconti (1975 Dora Ossenska RAI – 1968, L'invité du dimanche, INA - 1969 Lord Harewood BBC - 1969 documentary on Visconti, Man of Three Worlds, BBC)

Nevertheless, supporters of her so-called enemy, Renata Tebaldi – the queen of La Scala, before Callas took her place – try to dampen the public's applause.

Interview with Callas and Visconti, and an account of the "radish incident" (L'invité du dimanche, 1968): "At the end of the grand arias, we would hear people making noise in the upper gallery to try to stop the applause... then, one night, I picked up a bouquet of radishes off the stage, initially thinking they were flowers because of my terrible eyesight. Carrots even rained down from the gallery, and a few landed in Luchino Visconti's hands, who was under the trap door of the prompt box. He was in stitches. Can you imagine people coming to the opera house with carrots and radishes?"

That year, she opens the opera season in Chicago with a role she performs only once, but that will be immortalized on record: Madame Butterfly. Film of Callas on stage in Chicago's Civic Opera House during rehearsals of Madame Butterfly (private collection).

This is also the year of her first scandal, when her former impresario, Bagarozzy, demands that the contract she signed in 1947 be respected: police officers enter Callas' dressing room to hand her a subpoena on November 17, 1955. She was furious.

Interview with Callas after returning from Chicago, explaining the incident that took place (radio: 29 November 1955 RAI - radio: 1957 N. Ross): "It was the end of the season in Chicago and, as I was leaving the stage in costume as "Butterfly", bowing to the audience, I suddenly see a man waiting for me in the wings. At first, I thought it was an admirer who wanted an autograph, and suddenly, the man hands me a summons to appear in court. You can imagine how terrorized I felt. Many of you have already seen the images of an enraged Callas screaming and demanding justice. I was outraged..." The affair was financially settled out of court.

Photos of Callas in a kimono receiving the subpoena

Passages from Callas' unfinished autobiography

Finally, in 1956, she makes her début at the Metropolitan Opera in New York with Norma and, immediately afterwards, Lucia – we see a live recording and hear the interview during the intermission.

Aria "Il dolce suono" Lucia - Live 1956

Radio interview during intermission, 1956: "I have no talent for speeches, but I would like to tell this vast audience how happy I am to be here, in my home country... I would like to give you my regards and say thank you to those who

share my Greek blood, all the Greek people here, and to those who share my American blood. I was born here and consider myself American. And, also, to all the Italians, because I am an Italian wife."

During this season, she also sings a legendary version of Tosca at the Met. **A lost recording of the opera for television has recently be found: *Film of Callas in Tosca at the Met in 1956.***

But her triumphant debuts in America are spoiled by a scandalous article in the NY Times. Callas is devastated by the lies and her portrayal. This is the beginning of **a series of unfounded rumours** fuelled by the press, which Callas will never be able to prove wrong, despite all efforts. At the time, she is said to have made disparaging comments about her so-called rival, "La Tebaldi." Persuaded she must set the record straight, she replies on TV and radio.

Interview with Callas about her supposed rivalry with Tebaldi (radio: Rodrini/Fleetwood) "I fear no rival, because I have none... the day when someone can sing all of my repertoire, then we can talk about rivals..."

Passages from Callas' unfinished autobiography: she touches upon her friendship with La Tebaldi, then how they grew apart. But she always writes with great respect about her "colleague."

Interview in which Callas explains the troubles caused by the press and her delight at performing at the Met (radio: 1957 Rodrini).

Glory tainted by scandals

1957 begins with a new scandal. This time in Edinburgh. Callas is said to have left before her last performance of *Sonnambula* (part of the La Scala tour) in order to attend a ball in Venice being thrown in her honour. She must once again justify herself, first on the radio, then in her autobiography.

Aria of Sonnambula - live in Edinburgh, 1957

Photos of Callas in Edinburgh and on stage in Sonnambula

Interview in which Callas explains her sudden departure from Edinburgh (radio: 1957 Rodrini - radio: Pozzi 1957 RAI): "I respected our agreement and left in total harmony. I even received a visit from the Mayor before my departure. I perfectly respected my contract with La Scala. I always do what I promise, and if I don't, it's because I never promised I would..."

Passages from Callas' unfinished autobiography

We find Maria in Venice, accompanied by her husband – who is increasingly fading into the background – and of Elsa Maxwell, who has become her "jet-set" friend, and who introduces her to a certain Aristotle Onassis. **We discover a fun and carefree Maria, far from the rigors of opera. Simply a young girl, (almost) like any other.**

Short film and photos of Callas/Meneghini/Maxwell/Onassis in Venice (private collection)

Aria of Forza del destino - live in Athens, 1957

1957 is also the year of Callas' first time back to Greece for a potentially explosive concert – we hear an unpublished recording and an interview on Greek radio. Callas explains the cancellation of her first concert and justifies herself against all the accusations made against her: **"What is important for me and for you, who want to listen to me, is that here, in this dry climate that I am not used to, a little bit tired and run down, I had to cancel the concert. (...)** I want so much to sing well. Accept whatever I am with pleasure. Don't expect miracles. I don't know how to satisfy you...**You all know that I was grieved here, because of an unjust war against me.** Not the entire thing was depending on me. I was brought here by Mr. Mamakis, so that you can listen to me sing. I have nothing to do with politics. I really hope to please you Monday night with my singing. (...) I greet and kiss all of you! »

The concert given is exceptionally intense and the public is won over.

The year ends with a new feat – this time, audiovisual. For New Year's Eve, Callas sings the famous aria from Norma, live with the RAI orchestra, for all televisions throughout Europe.

Callas sings "Casta Diva" 12.12.1957 – RAI / INA

Sadly, this success is short-lived. In the first days of January, the second great scandal breaks out which will forever mar Callas' image. A reporter declares: "During the inauguration of the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome, in the presence of the President of the Republic, soprano Maria Meneghini Callas left the opera house in the middle of a performance, claiming she was ill."

1958 TV reports showing the crowd leaving the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome (RAI / Luce / INA / ITN)

Film of Callas leaving the stage (unaired footage - RAI)

For months, Callas will have to justify this incident – even fifteen years later in Japan! And this is the event that will earn her an unjust reputation as a temperamental and cyclothymic Diva.

Report showing Callas three days later, during an improvised press conference in her hotel (RAI): "It was just a cold, quite simply... I really tried, but after the first act, I knew I could not continue... I couldn't give a mediocre performance. It either had to be pure Callas or nothing at all... the problem is that they didn't plan for a substitute. And yet I'd told them, but they simply said, 'Who could replace Callas? No one...' So, I was trapped... Sometimes your voice does not cooperate, no matter how hard you try."

Interview: Person to Person, 1958

Interview: Hy Gardner, 1958

Letter by Callas "autodifesa"

Callas begins to feel a phenomenal amount of pressure on her shoulders. No matter how much she gives her audience, it never seems to be enough. She is slowly beginning to realize just how thankless this profession can be. The wound of being snubbed by the Italian public will never heal. She has given them everything, and bitterly says to Mr. Fleetwood, in an unaired audio interview, "You catch cold one night, and twenty years of work disappear in a flash. So you tell yourself, you might as well cut your own throat. What's the point of having a throat, if that's how it is going to end..."

Despite that, Callas does not cancel any of her commitments. And, soon, another legendary performance will take place: *La Traviata*, in Lisbon.

Arias from La Traviata, live in Lisbon, 1958

Callas now perfectly embodies the character of Violetta. She performs the role of the young courtesan in love, with all her subtleties.

Film of Callas on stage in La Traviata, Lisbon 1958 (Lisbon Opera/ RTP)

More than ever, she is Violetta: idolized one day, rejected the next, ending up alone and ill, hoping only to see the one man she ever truly loved once more. Her performance has matured since her first appearance in Florence – which she relates to De Hidalgo in a letter: **"At the end of my aria, 'Amami Alfredo', in a moment of total silence, I suddenly realize that the entire audience had tears in their eyes, some were even crying, even the musicians in the orchestra, even the technicians I saw in the wings...."**

When she explains her vision of Violetta to her friend, Lord Harewood, in a televised interview (BBC, 1968), one gets the impression she knows the character in her slightest nuances, both human and vocal: **"Violetta dies from having aspired to too much cheerfulness and, when she discovers true love, it is already too late. But she clings to this hope, whatever the cost... In the first act, she is still laughing about it. In the second, she isn't so carefree. And, in the third, she knows there is no longer any hope... It is like a dream we all have and hope will come true, even though that only rarely happens... life always**

resembles the roles.”

She will perform *La Traviata* twice more that year, in London, and finally, in Dallas, in a production by a former assistant of Visconti's: a young Franco Zeffirelli.

Never before seen photos of Callas' last Traviata, Dallas 1958

This is the last time she will sing as Violetta. After 1958, she also gives up another of her great characters – Lucia di Lammermoor – gradually putting her desire to leave the stage in motion.

Aria from Medea, live Dallas 1958

However, in Dallas, Callas would be dealt a fatal blow with the third and final great scandal of her career. After drawn-out negotiations regarding the Met's 1958-59 season (we hear the text of an unpublished letter from Callas to Rudolph Bing, director of the Met), on 6 November 1958, Callas receives a telegram signalling the end of her contract with the Metropolitan Opera.

That night, she sings *Medea* at the Dallas Opera – and her performance sounds like what must have been her most ferocious and volcanic *Medea* (we hear an unreleased audio recording). Back at her dressing room, she is swarmed by journalists. Still in costume, she gives an account of the events: **“We started quarrelling – involuntarily on my behalf... he offered me the old repertoire and I told him I couldn't do it, or rather my artistic conscience, along with my health, wouldn't allow it... I suppose that made him angry.”**

Despite these misadventures, a new triumph will round out 1958. Snubbed and scorned in Italy and America, **Callas will look for her salvation in Paris.**

TV interview with Callas at her arrival at Orly Airport, Paris (INA)

She accepts a custom-tailored gala in her honour that is broadcast on TV. The goal is to introduce Callas in flesh and blood to the French public.

1958 Gala – colourized for the first time with the original colours, found thanks to unpublished photos of the event. Arias from The Barber of Seville, Trovatore, and Norma “Casta Diva” (INA). Aria from Norma - live in Rome, 1955.

She sings a selection of grand arias, which are now famous all around the world through LP sales. For the second part, she performs the second act of *Tosca*, with her legendary partner, Tito Gobbi. The public are on their feet and the journalists lavish her with praise. The evening ends with an immense gala dinner in the Opéra Garnier ballroom, all in the presence of the global élite, who have come especially for the event – from Charlie Chaplin to Brigitte Bardot, by way of Jean Cocteau, Yves Saint Laurent, and many more.

In France, Callas finds a promised land, far from the hostilities of her past countries, and begins a great love affair between herself and Paris, as the interviews made during this short trip reveal. Callas' French is still very limited, but she already promises to return to Paris with a sold-out show at the Opéra, and shares all of her affection with the French public.

The day after the mythical gala, Callas says, **“the public was so warm and generous... we were happy to be together... naturally, I was scared. There was too much publicity. The French expected everything, and I wanted to give them more than everything. That's a bit hard to do, but everything went fine... With all my love, thank you.”**

Radio interview with Callas by Jose Artur, Charles Imbert, etc. (INA)

Among the prestigious guests at the Gala de Paris, Aristotle Onassis was present, whom Callas had met one year earlier in Venice. That night, at Garnier, he is suddenly aware of this Diva's unparalleled fame, who “brought Paris to its feet” (headline in *France Soir*). He decides to organize a cruise on his famed boat, the *Christina*, and invite the singer along with her husband. At first, Callas refuses, then gives into her husband, who sees an opportunity to rub elbows with the world's most famous businessman, and the Churchills, who were also coming along. Callas says in a letter: **“I didn't want to, but Battista insisted...”**

TV reports of the famous 1959 cruise, with Callas boarding the boat in the company of Winston Churchill. Reports during the cruise and its stopovers, mainly in Greece. Images of Callas with Onassis and their budding relationship.

This is finally a breath of fresh air for Maria, who is suddenly far from the opera world and its constraints. She discovers a man who seems to love her for who she is as a woman, and not for what she represents.

Several years later, she confides in Barbara Walters and Mike Wallace (CBS / NBC): **"I had become too famous for my own good... my husband always wanted me to be La Divina... my fame went to his head... at the end of the day, I'm just a little Greek girl born in America, even if I am a Diva... deep down, I think the most important thing for a woman is to have a man of her own and to make him happy... I would have happily given up my career..."»**

By the end of this vacation, Callas and Onassis are lovers, and this event will turn Maria's life upside down.

TV clip: Madness aria - Il pirata - live, Hamburg 1959

But music still remains Callas' major preoccupation. Only for not much longer. She begins the year 1959 with an important concert: Il pirata in Carnegie Hall. This is one of the only times where she will sing the role of this woman who is "tragically in love and goes mad" as she describes in her character analysis to Lord Harewood on the BBC. It's a gigantic success, proving to all New York that Callas can do just fine without the MET, and that she remains triumphant, despite it all.

Back in Milan, she participates in a television special hosted by Ed Murrow (TV Interview: 1959, Small World). She speaks for a long time about her career, her idea of opera, of music and composers. **It is a precious perspective on her art. This one-off interview has been recently rediscovered after disappearing for over 50 years.**

After the Rome incident, La Scala asks her to keep a low profile for some time. Callas will barely sing any operas at all that year. She decides to share her art with the public through concerts. She begins an international tour with her favourite conductor, Nicola Rescigno, performing a repertoire of her most famous arias.

TV: aria from Macbeth - live in Hamburg, 1959. The next day, she is interviewed by Rolf Mitler (Bavarian TV) who asks her about her personality and resilience.

Radio interview: M. Banzet, 1965 about her characters.

We begin to notice that Callas' selection of arias, both for her concerts and throughout her career, almost always reflect the events of her life at that very moment. She identifies so strongly with her characters, sometimes blurring the lines between fiction and reality. The aria from Il pirata mentioned above corresponds perfectly to the amour fou and dilemma she is facing between her husband and Onassis. She deeply understands the women she plays, knows their feelings, including Norma and Medea's infanticides: **"They must sacrifice everything for the men they love. Even their children."**

During this tour, she is triumphantly welcomed in every town and every country. We see her in the many images of her arrivals, especially in Amsterdam. (Broll: Arrival in Amsterdam, 1959)

In late 1959, Callas has gone through a transfiguration: her hair is short, and her face beams with a sort of carefree happiness when she arrives at Milan airport. (Broll: 1959, NBC airports) **Maria has just left her husband and joined Onassis.**

She hopes to be granted a divorce (Broll: 1959 TribCourtunal, divorce). But it will not be so simple, because of an archaic Italian law. For years, Callas will have to fight her husband in court. She writes her American lawyer friend for help... Letters to Walter Cummings read by Fanny Ardant: **"I left Battista, but Italian law is not in my favour... I'd like to get married again...."**

She will have to wait until 1966 to give up her American citizenship and take on Greek nationality, finally allowing her to remarry. She confides in a journalist one night, while coming home. (TV: 1966, Paris interview). **Callas moves into Onassis' Paris apartment, on Avenue Foch, and devotes more and more of her time to this romance, along with the jet-set life that comes with it.**

Act III.

The sixties: from joy to heartache

Final roles in La Scala and Greece

Early 1960 heralds Callas' return to La Scala, where she performs a new role, "Poliuto." This is the only time **she will ever sing this opera – we hear it on an unreleased recording.** As she bows to the public, we see Onassis in the balcony by the proscenium, with Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly. A journalist interviews Callas, looking relieved as she leaves the stage: **"I'm happy to be back at La Scala, and that everything went so well..."**

TV: clips of Callas on stage in Poliuto + Callas interview after premiere of Poliuto (RAI).

She will only ever return to La Scala one last time, in the following year for her final Medea. Upon leaving the stage for this last concert, she says to Emilio Pozzi: **"The more Maria becomes Callas, the more scared she is... Medea was never scared, but Maria is..."**

TV: clips of Callas on stage in Medea + Callas interview backstage after Medea show. This is the last time that she will grace the stage of La Scala.

1960 heralds Callas' return to Greece for the second time in nearly 20 years. This time, she will sing Norma to a full house (we see unpublished photos) and Medea the following year.

She is interviewed for Greek radio and discusses her early years in Athens.

TV: report of Callas rehearsing in Epidaurus, Greece 1961

1960-61 are also Callas' jet-set years. We see her at parties and galas, as well as her surprising arrival at the Cannes Film Festival, where she outshines all the stars.

Report Callas in Cannes, 1960.

TV: Callas with Jacqueline de Ribes at a party; then dancing with Onassis in Monaco; trips with Onassis in Mallorca.

She finally records an LP of French opera arias at the Salle Wagram, with the man who will become her favourite conductor: Georges Prêtre.

Professional concerts and intimate passion

Callas now prefers concerts over whole operas, which are often too demanding and keep her away from Onassis for too long. She decides to begin a tour of recitals with Georges Prêtre, one of which takes place in Hamburg. She now sings an aria from Ernani, where the young, carefree lover calls out for her Prince Charming to take her away from it all, where they will live happily ever after. She also inaugurates the role of "Carmen" (which she had always refused)

with her famous "Habanera" ("L'Amour est un oiseau rebelle"). **Indeed, Callas has discovered love, and this is the repertoire from which she now chooses her arias.** The last choice turns out to be the most prophetic: "O don fatale" from Don Carlo. She is interviewed by Rolf Mitler, and says to him, **"Today, I'm happy...."**

The other event of 1962 is her participation in the concert given in honour of President Kennedy in New York. Callas sings Carmen, just before Marilyn's arrival...

TV clip: Callas singing Carmen for JFK in NYC 1962 + unreleased Super 8 film.

She will sing "Carmen" in London that same year in another major concert (TV clip: Golden Hour concert in London, 1962)

In 1963, she continues her recital tour, with a very special concert in Paris, where she now lives. Here, for the first and only time, she sings a selection of arias from the French opera repertoire on stage – we hear the unpublished recording of the concert.

The night before the concert, a conversation is recorded with her friend and manager, Michel Glotz: **"We're thinking of staging Bellini's Norma in Paris next year... you remember, in 1958, it was such a lovely evening... when there are triumphs like that, I get a bit scared. It's always difficult to come back to that... Bellini is part of my ideal world...."**

Unpublished colour photos of Callas in Onassis' Avenue Foch apartment

Letters and printed interviews with the press read by Fanny Ardant

Her final moments at the Opera

At that time, whenever she left the music world, Maria's only pleasure was to return to Onassis and their boat, touring the Mediterranean, often in the company of friends, like Georges Prêtre, Franco Zeffirelli, or even Prince Rainier and Grace. **Never-before-seen Super 8 films show this relaxed atmosphere, as well as a happy, carefree Maria.**

During one of their cruises, on a detour through a Greek village celebrating a local festival, Maria Callas even accepts to sing in the village square, with only an upright piano on the tiny stage. It's incredibly surprising to see the opera singer in a summer dress performing an aria from Cavaleria Rusticage ("Voilo sapete") with the greatest poise – "You know mother..." she sings. Once again, her choice is no accident.

Super 8 film of Callas in Levkas, singing "Voilo sapete".

But, as promised, Callas decides to offer Paris two complete operas: Tosca and Norma. Both are directed by Franco Zeffirelli and conducted by Georges Prêtre. (TV report: Callas at the Opéra de Paris). However, it has been four years since she has sung an entire opera. For the first time, she is having problems with her voice, especially with a role so taxing on her voice. For the occasion, she agrees to a long interview with Bernard Gavoty in her home, Avenue Foch, where she discusses her career, her life as a woman, her roles, and her public.

TV interview: Bernard Gavoty, "Une heure avec" 1964.

She also talks about her ex-husband in an article for LIFE entitled, "My lonely world", read by Fanny Ardant: "The world has condemned me for leaving my husband. But I didn't leave him – he left me because I would no longer let him take care of my business affairs.... My fear has always been to live my old age or die in poverty." And the problems with her voice: "I admit to having had a terrible vocal crisis two or three years ago. But I sincerely feel I have overcome the major problems...."

The few concerts in Paris of Tosca and Norma are incredible successes, as seen

by the rare (unreleased) Super 8 films made by admirers. We see Callas in different scenes, and when she takes her bow: the audience give her a standing ovation, chanting at the top of their lungs, "Divina! Divina!" However, from the recordings, we can hear her voice is no longer what it once was. And, even though her performance of the character has reached the pinnacle of perfection, the emotion is great, but the notes occasionally come out with difficulty in Norma. Tosca, on the other hand, is less demanding, and Callas perfectly embodies it, as the famous London recording shows.

Film: Tosca in London, 1964

Aria from Tosca - live at the Met, 1965

In 1965, Callas accepts to perform her two roles in Paris and London for a few more dates, and even accepts an offer from the MET. She makes her comeback, 7 years after her explosive dismissal. At the very first words of the Tosca, "Mario, Mario", she is interrupted and given a standing ovation by a hysterical crowd – as can be heard on the previously unreleased recording (Report: Callas Returns to the Met).

Upon her return to Paris, she is interviewed by her friend, William Weaver, and relates how moved she was at that moment. She also agrees to a long interview on French radio, with Micheline Banzet. Finally, she participates in the show "Les Grands Interprètes" ("The Great Performers") in 1965. But the last performance of Norma is incredibly taxing, and **Callas faints in the dressing room, after the second act. An announcement is made in the theatre that the opera cannot be finished** – we hear the unreleased recording of Norma, 29 May 1965.

In an interview taking place in her Avenue Foch flat, in 1966 (Interview by Emilio Pozzielle for RAI), she talks about her years at La Scala, and possibly returning – but not in the near future. She must first "find her inner peace and take care of her voice."

However, Callas will never sing on the stage of any opera house ever again.

Imminent break-up

Having decided to put her career on hold, from 1965 to 1968, Maria devotes herself entirely to the man she loves. Their relationship, however, grows strained: Onassis is interested in the new icon of the times: Jackie Kennedy. He neglects Maria, who finds herself increasingly alone. She moves out of Onassis' Avenue Foch flat and finds refuge at 36 Avenue Georges Mandel, where she will live out the last ten years of her life.

A few months before their separation, she writes a final letter to Onassis for his birthday. He is celebrating it on the Christina, while she remains in Paris. Letter from Callas to Onassis: **"Aristo, my love... we've been through so many hardships... know that I am yours, body and soul... do what you want with me."**

No longer feeling that she has the strength to return to the stage, she agrees to a series of interviews on opera, with Edward Downes (1967) for American radio, and with Lord Harewood (1968) for British television. Jacques Bourgeois also records an unreleased interview.

In October 1968, Callas learns through the media that Onassis has married Jackie Kennedy. Devastated but graceful, she appears in public the next day at a high-society party, more beautiful than ever, to show the world that Callas is still standing. But, deep down, she is wounded and humiliated. She has lost the only love she has ever known. (Report: premiere of La Puce à l'Oreille)

She writes to De Hidalgo (letter): **"You heard the news, like the entire world. There's nothing more to say about it... but one must take life as it comes. I am free from a destructive relationship, from every point of view. Thankfully, I am surrounded by friends...."**

And it is, precisely, one of her friends – John Ardoin, in 1968 – who records a poignant conversation during one of Maria's visits to Dallas. She confides in him about the break-up and humiliation, and ends by saying, **"I must sing again, no matter what it takes."**

Act IV.

Final attempts: from cinema to comeback

Callas in a Pier Paolo Pasolini film

In early 1969, Callas is invited as a guest on a TV special with Jacques Bourgeois and Luchino Visconti. We find a happy and congenial Callas on a sofa in her apartment, where a crew has set up their cameras. She even mentions the possibility of a new Traviata for the following year. But this project will never see the light of day. Still unsure of her capacities to sing, and now virtually terrified of being on stage, **Callas will not continue her career in music, but in cinema.**

In "L'invité du dimanche", she also announces her first film with director Pier Paolo Pasolini, on a character she knows inside-out: Medea. (TV clip 1968 of L'invité du dimanche - colourized)

The shoot is a wonderful experience, and Callas reveals herself to be very comfortable on set, despite the heat and difficult conditions of the Turkish desert. In the TV reports and hitherto unreleased Super 8 films, we see a professional actress throwing herself wholeheartedly into this new career, and talking about her fetish character, whom she has brought from stage to screen. (TV report during Medea shoot + interviews with Callas and Pasolini)

Super 8 film during Medea shoot in Turkey

During the shoot, an incredible, passionate relationship develops between Callas and Pasolini, somewhere between friendship and platonic love, as can be seen in Callas' letters at the time (read by Fanny Ardant): "Dear Pier Paolo, I received your book, and your dear letter – I'm sorry for you – but happy to see you confiding in me. Dear friend – I'm sad not to be by your side in these difficult moments – as you often were for me.... You will make it. I did – a sensitive woman like me! – and yet, I've come to understand that you can only count on yourself. Yes, alas – don't mock me. It's also sad, especially for me, to acknowledge this. You can never rely on anyone for very long. It's a law of nature. We must find our own inner strength – or, at least, in all appearances. **I'm not talking to you as a mother might, dear Pier Paolo – and I've never seen you as my father. Books know many things – but not harsh reality – and they never teach what I think and will believe until my death: only through one's own willpower can one arrive at a sense of pride and self-esteem. This is what I'm trying to do."**

The film is released in 1970. (Report: premiere of film Medea at the Opéra). It is presented with great pomp at Opéra Garnier, resulting in a new series of interviews, where Callas discusses her first film experience and potential future projects. She also discusses her opera career, but in the past tense, this time.

Extrait TV: interviews January 1970, with France Roche, Roland Lomme, etc.

The film turns out to be a commercial flop. And, seeing no future in their ambiguous relationship, Callas cuts off all contact with Pasolini overnight.

The master classes

In late 1970, Callas returns to the US and accepts a long interview with star-host David Frost. This hour-long interview is rich with its variety of topics (career, private life...). In it, we see a relaxed, laughing Maria, far from the cold image of La Diva. She answers every question, without compromise. **This interview has been lost for the past 40 years. The only copy of it has been found and will be shown for the first time since its live broadcast.** In it, Callas mentions her desire to teach, **"in order to share her knowledge of Bel Canto to young artists and have them benefit from her experience."**

Julliard, the renowned music school in New York, will offer her this opportunity, with two cycles of courses between 1971 and 1972. The previously unheard audio recordings of her classes reveal her unique method, where Callas herself will often sing in order to teach her students. These master classes are a laboratory for Callas who gradually finds enough confidence to sing again in an environment where she feels safe and can test her voice. **The Super 8 films and unpublished photos offer a precious account of the atmosphere present in these classes.**

The farewell tour

Convinced by Giuseppe Di Stefano, her colleague from her "golden era", Callas accepts an international concert tour of duets, with piano. The tour lasts a year and a half, between London and Japan, stopping in the world's biggest cities (*Clip of London 1973 concert, and Tokyo in 1974*).

Many unpublished documents highlight this period, outside of these two recorded concerts in London and Tokyo (Callas' final appearance on stage). Time has passed and Callas accepts to be more open in interviews. (*Interview with David Holmes, 1973 - interview with Mike Wallace, 1974 - interview with Barbara Walters, 1974 - TV interview in Berlin, 1973*).

Films of concerts show a radiant Callas, whose performance is absolutely flawless. But what we hear is the shadow of her former voice. In spite of this, we see how happy she is to return to the stage and her audience – perhaps the only true love of her life. For each concert, she dedicates "O mio babbino caro" to them, adding "to my dear public." They return the favour by giving her a standing ovation. However, journalists do not hesitate to challenge her on the difficulties she is having with her voice. She often has to justify herself: **"No one is who they were twenty years ago... I continue to work, with the help of my colleague, Di Stefano, who has experienced the same difficulties as me. And I'm confident that, with more concerts, my voice will improve..."** *The images of the Japan tour are among the last we will ever see of Callas, in the company of her colleague, who has also become her lover.*

Aria from Don Carlo, live in Tokyo (or Boston), 1974

TV interview in Tokyo 1974 + press conference

Finally, several letters written by Maria to her godfather, Leonidas Lantzounis (read by Fanny Ardant), demonstrate her joy and dedication – but also her doubts, especially regarding "a love affair that makes no sense, with a married man" (i.e., Di Stefano) and that will be "over soon."

One final, failed attempt

The long tour and affair with Di Stefano are not enough to let Maria forget the only man she has ever loved: Onassis. During her 1971 vacation in Greece with her friend, Nadia Stancioff, Onassis – now married for three years with Jackie – joins her on the island, where photographers capture a kiss. Other paparazzi photos in Paris show the adulterous couple together. Onassis regrets having chosen Jackie, but it is too late.

1975, Onassis is dying. He goes to a hospital in Paris, but Maria cannot see him because a swarm of journalists have blocked the entrance to her building, ready to pounce. (*Report: Onassis at the hospital*)

She decides to join her godfather in Florida where she can escape the pressures of the media and the unbearable fatality of Onassis' death. **A previously unseen Super 8 film, shot by Maria's butler, shows her during her last vacation in Florida.** As always, in private life, she is simple and has fun for the camera. But she is no longer a young woman, and we see all the sadness and solitude she carries inside her.

Onassis dies one month later and Callas returns to Paris. She will almost never leave her apartment. She agrees to an interview in her home for RAI, talking about her years at La Scala. The events have clearly taken their toll. She nostalgically talks about **"a happier time... we were a family..."** This is Callas' last appearance on television. (Interview filmed by Dora Ossenska – RAI.) Visconti dies a few weeks later. Another blow to Maria.

In 1976, having never lost the hope of returning to the stage, Callas organizes secret rehearsals in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Paparazzi photos and a clandestine recording once again reveal an artist who has never stopped working, since music is all she has left (Photos and audio recording at TCE, 1976.) Sadly, a poisonous article written by a journalist who snuck into the theatre describes Callas' voice as being in tatters, putting an end to this final adventure. Later that same year, she will agree to a final interview with Philippe Caloni, where she discusses the current times, which she no longer understands, the young artists who are not up to standard, and her impression of feeling "useless."

In her final letters to her godfather, read by Fanny Ardant, Maria Callas writes: **"I don't have any projects for now, and don't know what I'd do... I've decided to stop seeing you-know-who, and I'm happy in Paris, for now."**

Epilogue

1977. Images of Maria Callas' funeral to the music of the prelude to the third act of *Traviata*. As the coffin is taken out of the church, someone yells out "Brava!" and everyone applauds.

We hear Maria's voice, as she says:

«Dear public, please try to see me as a musician that only dedicates herself to music. Do not believe a lot of nonsense that can be said about me.»

The film ends with the aria "Qui la voce": Callas' very first recording in 1949. In it, we hear all the ardour, fiery youth, dreams and purity of her unique voice. To the sound of this aria, we see a series of images of Callas in her greatest years.

The director

Tom Volf discovered Maria Callas by accident, when he stumbled upon a recording of hers that captivated him. An entire constellation opened up to him. This passion pushed him to travel the world for 3 years in search of the true Maria Callas and meet the last survivors of her generation, her close friends, colleagues, and those who truly knew her. His research allowed him to collect enough impressive and previously unseen material to make this film.

He worked on this documentary in close collaboration with Nadia Stancioff, Maria Callas' close friend, who once said to her, "If I must die before you, I want you to tell people who I truly was."

Tom Volf has directed many short films about opera and was in charge of audiovisual communication at the Théâtre du Châtelet for three years.

Among the many great figures he has interviewed are Placido Domingo, Sting, and David Cronenberg. He has also directed many corporate films and commercials, while also filming many interviews with writers.

The treatment

Only Callas' words

No other voice but Callas' and the voices of the actors reading her letters or interviews will intervene to tell her story.

Fanny Ardant will read a number of unpublished letters:

- Love letters written to her husband, Meneghini, showing a woman in love, who cares only about her husband's well-being.
- Letters to her singing teacher, De Hidalgo, revealing Maria before she became La Divina: a young, ambitious artist going from audition to audition in the hopes of getting her first role in an opera house. This correspondence proves she was ready to accept many personal sacrifices in order to succeed in her career.
- Unique lettre d'amour écrite par Maria à Onassis quelques mois avant leur séparation.

Colourization and elegant graphic design

The new light being shed on Callas' life should be colourful, and lively. In fact, most of the archives and photos that were found happened to be in colour. **However, certain black and white archives will be colourized in order to make them feel new again.** This will be based on the colours found in the original photos.

The film's credits and captions of archives, works, places and dates will be done using simple and elegant graphic design. Occasionally, titles allowing to contextualize an important moment (for example, "Arriving in Paris") will also be inserted into the archives, as well as televised news reports of the time.

Exceptional archives

- **A film from 1970 (90 minutes) that had been considered lost for four decades.** This account reveals a fragile woman, right after her break-up with Onassis, and an artist who doubts after putting her career on hold for five years. Maria Callas revisits her career and, for the first time, discusses her youth in Athens during the war.
- **interviews for American, Italian and French television, in which Callas opens up in the most surprising way,** very frankly, about her relationship with her only true love, Onassis, her relationship to Meneghini, her unique voice, and even the pressures of being iconic.
- **Maria Callas' more intimate moments, filmed on Super 8,** showing a very different woman from that of La Diva — her vacation with Onassis on the Christina; the royal family of Monaco; with Georges Prêtre; Franco Zeffirelli; the film of her last vacation in Florida several months before her death ...
- **other recently discovered Super 8 films that were secretly shot during her operas:** concerts filmed by her admirers during memorable evenings, for instance at her London concerts; *Norma* in 1965; the very moving concerts of her farewell tour.

two forgotten archives rediscovered:

> At the BBC, a short film that was said to be lost, but had been poorly classified. **This is the one and only time we see her in her father's company, when he came to her defense in the public conflict opposing Maria and her mother in 1958.**

> At NBC where, in 1969, accompanied by Pier Paolo Pasolini, she discusses the shift in her career and her determination to become a film actress.

A very large quantity of unpublished photos will also illustrate all the different periods of her life: photos from her childhood in Greece and her screen debut at age 15, as well as the rare photos of the last year of her life.

Finally, live audio recordings from a host of concerts and operas, allowing spectators to realize the wealth of vocal performances given by The Voice of the Century on stage.

The producers

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Since being founded by Emma Lepers in 2005, PETIT DRAGON has developed and produced contemporary and atypical projects by talented, passionate auteurs and directors. PETIT DRAGON gives priority to cultural themes, exploring issues, and social topics, bringing open-minded perspectives and analysis through documentaries (Abderrahmane Sissako, San Francisco, Family Goldmine, Le Bonheur est dans l'Assiette), web series (Sound System 10 x 5', Téléportation 2016 10 x 4', Le Futur Est de Retour 7 x 7' - I ART Marfa 5 x 5' for Arte Creative), and the cinema (Danger Dave by Philippe Petit released in June 2014).

ÉLÉPHANT DOC – Gaël Leibling

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Since 2010 Gaël Leibling has been at the helm of ÉLÉPHANT DOC, producing documentaries, placing emphasis on originality, both in terms of content and form. Roughly fifteen films are made a year: historical documentaries, social films, in-depth portraits – including the highly-regarded Macron, la stratégie du météore (France 3), Le clan Chirac, Une famille au cœur du pouvoir (France 2), Usain Bolt (France 2), Nos chers Paradis, Futur par Starck, (Arte). ÉLÉPHANT DOC belongs to the GROUPE ÉLÉPHANT, an audiovisual group founded by Emmanuel Chain and Thierry Bizot in August 1999.