

MARIA by CALLAS

Monday, January 7, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan / LA Times Not Rated 112 Mins.

Her fans, and they are many, call her "La Divina," the divine one, and "Maria By Callas" shows the reasons why.

Closer to a deity than a singer to her devotees, Maria Callas was an extraordinary opera star who brought dramatic intensity and emotional intelligence to her roles, not to mention an off-stage life that included a much-publicized love affair with one of the world's wealthiest men, fellow Greek Aristotle Onassis.

Leonard Bernstein called Callas "pure electricity." Eager admirers would unhesitatingly camp out overnight when tickets for her performances went on sale. Everything she did made newspaper headlines. But who was she, and what was it like to be in her presence?

Director Tom Volf initially planned to do a conventional documentary to answer these questions, and in fact spent a year interviewing some 30 friends of the great diva, who died in 1977 at age 53.

Instead Volf decided it would be more intimate and revealing to do a film on Callas almost entirely in her own words, using performance footage, TV interviews and home movies as well as letters and unpublished memoirs movingly read by contemporary opera luminary Joyce DiDonato.

The result actually works as Volf planned. While "Maria By Callas" is short on facts and biographical detail, it expertly presents an emotional essence of this performer, leaving you both shaken and stirred by the extent of her gifts and the way they connected to both audiences and her tumultuous life.

A first-time filmmaker but known as a photographer, Volf made good on a number of risky production choices that enhanced the effects he sought.

Rather than inundate viewers with a hoard of snippets, Volf presents several arias filmed in their entirety. These include a 1958 performance of Callas' signature aria, "Casta Diva" from Bellini's "Norma," and an aria from Puccini's "Tosca" that expressed her personal philosophy: "Vissi d'arte, Vissi d'amore," I lived for art, I lived for love.

When he discovered color photographs of performances, as Volf did with that "Norma" aria, the director has delicately colorized the black-and-white footage to match. Similarly, his decision to show the sprocket holes and frames of original 8 mm home movies effectively enhances the sense of time past.

Volf has been persuasive in his contacts with Callas' inner circle, getting not only that 8 mm footage but also unearthing a copy, saved by the diva's butler, of a 1970 interview Callas gave to David Frost that was thought to be lost.

That conversation is in depth enough for Volf to use it as his documentary's spine, returning to it again and again for Callas' candid comments on key aspects of her life.

Born of Greek parents in New York, Callas and her family were caught in Greece during World War II, where her musical training began. The film features a charming interview with Callas' teacher, Elvira de Hidalgo, who remembers her student as a hard worker with a formidable drive.

Despite her great gifts, Callas as an adult felt she had been pushed too hard into having an operatic career, first by her domineering mother and then by her husband, Giovanni Battista Meneghini.

She would have happily given it all up to have children and a domestic existence, Callas informed a dubious Frost, adding "but destiny is destiny and there is no way out."

That conflict between personal and professional personas was key, Callas felt, to her life. "There are two people in me actually; there is Maria but also Callas," she told Frost. "I have to live up to all of myself."

Because its structure is tied to Callas' on-the-record words, not all the issues of her life are dealt with in the documentary. But it does go into detail about her most celebrated professional scandal, when illness caused her to cancel the second half of a performance in Rome, and the disbelieving media, active even before internet trolls, pilloried her unmercifully. "My lynching," she says tartly, "had begun."



"Maria by Callas" also deals extensively with the married singer's long romance with the equally married Onassis and her total shock when he threw her over to marry Jackie Kennedy.

DiDonato is especially strong reading the letters from this period. "I am so lost," Callas wrote when she got the news, though the two eventually reconciled. "Our affair was a failure," she explains, "but our friendship was a success."

"I have done everything honestly," Callas summed up to Frost. "I cannot learn the art of being a hypocrite." Her fans wouldn't have it any other way.

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SHOPLIFTERS

A FILM BY KORE-EDA HIROKAZU

Monday, January 28, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis / NY Times *Rated R* *121 Mins.*

A lot of movies try to sell the sanctity or pathology of the family, sliding over complications that might get in the way of easy endings. In “Shoplifters,” a beautifully felt family drama, the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda dives into the mess with a story about a household on the ragged edge. From father to son, the family presents an unusual domestic portrait, though what you notice is that its struggles don’t ennoble it. The mother and father work, but there’s slyness here and hardness. And the family steals — food, toiletries, whatever — thieving to live but also as a way of life.

Kore-eda has the sensitive, calibrated touch of a master safecracker, and he’s a virtuoso of emotional and narrative buildup. His nuanced approach and self-effacing visual style give you room to breathe and to think; he doesn’t try to bludgeon you into feeling. (He knows the emotions will come.) His way of discreetly unwrapping stories and people is pleasurable; you never feel as if he’s gaming you. But it’s also a shrewd way to build suspense. Even when something out of the ordinary happens — as when this family kidnaps a child — the movie’s pulse remains fairly steady even as yours begins racing.

Kore-eda’s great subject is the contemporary family, a topic that gives him an immensity of themes, including loss, love, class, alienation in the modern world and just about everything else. (In “Air Doll,” about a man and his sex doll, it’s still a family affair.) He’s especially interested in — and brilliant at directing — children, whose vulnerabilities recurrently become the fulcrum of his stories. In “Like Father, Like Son,” a bourgeois father decides to relinquish his young son, who was switched with another child at birth. It’s a tragic setup that Kore-eda marshals for an exploration of love and the cascading brutalities of social convention.

The family in “Shoplifters” returns Kore-eda to the marginalized world of one of his best movies, “Nobody Knows,” about young children abandoned by their mother. The setup in “Shoplifters” seems more ordinary and straightforward, and its family — an affectionate, likably chaotic group — initially comes across more as eccentric or freewheeling than anything else. Everything looks fairly ordinary, if cramped and cluttered, without such middle-class givens as personal space and beds. The youngest child, Shota (Kairi Jyo), a solemn boy of around 10 with a boy-band shock of hair, sleeps in a dark nook that looks a lot like a storage cabinet.

The house grows more crowded with the arrival of Juri (Miyu Sasaki), an unsettlingly melancholic, physically reserved girl of 5. Shota and the father, Osamu (a great Lily Franky, by turns affable and unsavory), first see the girl shivering outside her home. It’s night and they are returning from one of their raids on a grocery store, walking and talking while munching on snacks. They hear Juri first, moving about outside her door, her parents nowhere in sight. “She’s there again,” says Osamu. Before long, Juri is in Osamu and Shota’s house nibbling croquettes. “You’re so skinny,” Grandma (Kilin Kiki), tells her, right before noticing the scars stippling the tiny girl’s body.

In most movies, a kidnapped child is enough to get the story up and jumping. Juri’s presence has a far more subtle effect on the narrative and the family, which itself suggests that there’s more to it than quirks and offbeat personalities. Several months after Juri

arrives, her disappearance hits the news. Osamu and the rest of the family agree that it certainly looks bad, their understatement drifting into grim comedy. But they decide that it’s too late to do anything, including return Juri to her abusive parents. Osamu’s partner, Nobuyo (a fantastic Sakura Ando), instead cuts Juri’s hair and takes her shopping, holding up little dresses for approval before stuffing them into bags.

In Kore-eda’s movies well-meaning people make terrible choices. And so life continues much the same, although the news about Juri — and the family’s unblinking pragmatism — unsettles the inaugural calm. Or, rather, considering that no one seems really rattled by what the kidnapping might mean for the family’s future, you begin questioning your original perceptions, rewinding scenes and sentences for new meaning. Who are these people, you wonder as Kore-eda adds more revealing detail and nuance, his calm camera steadily keeping the family centered as they slurp their noodles.

Kore-eda also wrote and edited “Shoplifters,” and he builds momentum as he fills in a larger family portrait, often by following individual members separately into the world. Osamu works in construction, pushing brooms. Nobuyo works in a laundry, where she presses clothes after sneakily emptying their pockets. The family’s adult daughter, Aki (Mayu Matsuo), works at a sex club. There, in a row of semiprivate booths, she and other women perform for anonymous clients, shedding underwear to mechanically bob up and down before smoked windows. It’s a predictably bleak snapshot of alienation, but Kore-eda also makes it devastating.

Much of the time, Kore-eda follows Shota and Juri as they wander about and occasionally steal from stores. Shota doesn’t go to school — he thinks that staying home indicates some kind of special status — but he’s a smart kid. He also already seems like an old soul, with adult composure and watchful, worried eyes that can seem as sad as Juri’s. He’s initially jealous of her, but soon warms to the younger child. In a brief scene that speaks to Kore-eda’s idealism about other people, a storekeeper who Shota targets gives the children some candy and tells the boy not to make his sister steal.

Midway through “Shoplifters,” Kore-eda has revealed just enough about the family — there’s a scramble from authority and an amusingly cunning shakedown — that it no longer seems to hold much mystery. But it’s at this point where other mysteries take over and where “Shoplifters” deepens, opening up a story about a family with a declaration of moral principles and lifting what had been a good movie into greatness. In the past, Kore-eda’s delicacy has at times enervated his movies. Here, though, the family’s toughness, thieving and secrets, its poverty and desperation, work like ballast on his sensibilities. In their grubby imperfections, Kore-eda finds a perfect story about being human.

In Japanese with English subtitles.



THE GUILTY

Monday, February 4, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan / LA Times Rated R 85 Mins.

If the setting of "The Guilty" couldn't be simpler, its immaculate execution by first-time director Gustav Möller couldn't be more gripping and involving.

A disturbing Danish psychological thriller and a real-time police drama that's equal parts provocative and emotional, "The Guilty" wrings complex drama out of its minimalist physical trappings.

Like 2014's Tom Hardy vehicle "Locke," "The Guilty" is a single-location film that consists almost entirely of a series of telephone conversations that get increasingly complex and unexpected.

A precise, sure-handed filmmaker, Möller not only believes that "the strongest images in film, the ones that stay with you the longest, they are the ones you don't see," he has the skill to convince us as well.

Working with co-writer Emil Nygaard Albertsen, Möller has set his film in the police emergency services control room of a large city — unnamed, though presumably Copenhagen.

The first sounds we hear, not surprisingly, are ringing phones. The first image we see in Jasper Spanning's taut cinematography is the close-up of an ear with a telephone earpiece firmly in place.

On dispatcher duty this evening is officer Asger Holm, played with an impact that gradually overpowers you by top Danish actor Jakob Cedergren.

Asger, it's clear almost immediately, is not business as usual as a dispatcher. When people call in for help, he is as likely as not to give them a sarcastic hard time for getting drunk or being in the red-light district in the first place as he is to send help.

Cedergren has given Asger a stern, rigid visage, presenting him physically as well as verbally as an uncompromising moralist with a sense of mission, someone who has no doubt he knows right from wrong.

That doesn't mean, however, that he can't be disturbed or unsettled, as he is by a call on his personal mobile from a journalist who asks him if he has any comments on his court date the following day.

What becomes clear is what we could have guessed: dispatcher is not Asger's regular beat. He has been temporarily assigned there pending the outcome of that legal proceeding, the cause of which we gradually learn more about.

All this is merely the setup for the main event. The phone rings again and on the line is no disoriented drunk but someone whose situation will change the nature of Asger's night, maybe even of his life.

The caller is Iben (Jessica Dinnage), a woman who sounds like she is talking to her young daughter.

Asger quickly catches on that Iben is talking to him in a kind of code, trying to convey that she is in trouble without coming out and saying it, and he helps her along by asking a series of yes or no questions about her situation.

What he discovers is that Iben is in a car being driven by her ex-husband and being taken somewhere very much against her will.

Alive to all the grim possibilities a kidnapping presents, the moralist in Asger tries to piece together what is going on, bending heaven and earth to do the right thing for this endangered woman.

It can't be over-emphasized how carefully screenwriters Möller and Albertsen have constructed this story, doling out information sparingly, on a need-to-know basis, letting their plot purposefully unroll like a ball of twine.



As that is happening, "The Guilty" is ratcheting up both the level of tension and our worry for the people involved as the nature of the unexpected kinds of jeopardy they are involved in gradually becomes clearer.

Helping in this is the superior nature of the performances, starting with star Cedergren, who brings startling nuance and expression to the tight close-ups that dominate the film.

But "The Guilty" wouldn't succeed as well as it did without the complex editing of Carla Luffe and the involved voices of those who engage Asger on the phone, starting with costar Dinnage but including Johan Olsen and Omar Shargawi in key supporting roles.

One of "The Guilty's" more potent elements is its emphasis on Asger's genuine passion for police work. "We're protection, we protect people who need help," he says on the phone at one point, and his sincerity is never in doubt.

How that belief, that sense of purpose, interacts with the real world in this twisty story — and whether things will work out the way those on the screen or in the audience expect — is the heart of this very fine film. It's a heart that beats as strongly as anyone could hope for. In Danish with English Subtitles.

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Justin Chang, Los Angeles Times

Monday, January 28 at 7:30 pm



"A pulse-pounding, twisty crime thriller that masterfully ratchets up the tension with chillingly effective results."

Michael Rechtshaffen, Hollywood Reporter

Monday, February 4 at 7:30 pm