



# The Main Feature

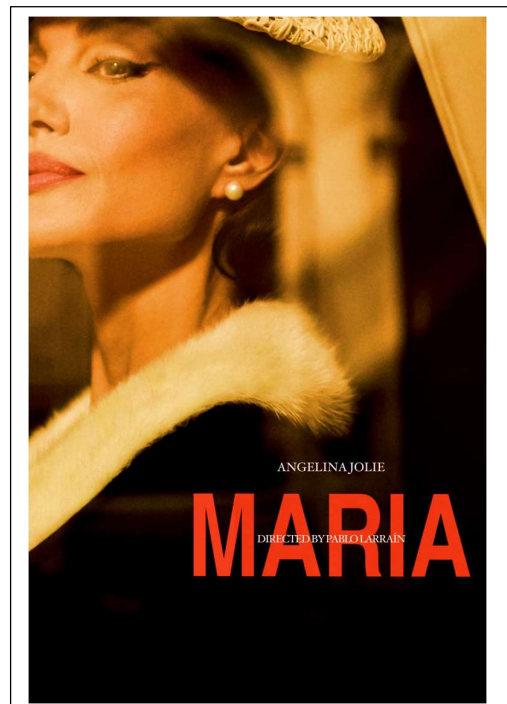
Season 45 – Issue 2 – Screening 25<sup>th</sup> September 2025

## ***Maria***

US/Italy/Germany 2024  
124 mins 12A

|             |                         |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| Director    | Pablo Larraín           |
| Written by  | Steven Knight           |
| Photography | Edward Lachman          |
| Costumes    | Massimo Cantini Parrini |
| Design      | Guy Hendrix Dyas        |

|                      |                            |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Angelina Jolie       | Maria Callas               |
| Pierfrancesco Favino | Ferruccio (butler, driver) |
| Alba Rohrwacher      | Bruna (housekeeper)        |
| Haluk Bilginer       | Aristotle Onassis          |
| Kodi Smit-McPhee     | Mandrax                    |
| Valeria Golino       | Yakinthi (sister)          |
| Vincent Macaigne     | Doctor Fontainebleau       |
| Stephen Ashfield     | Jeffrey Tate (conductor)   |



Our presentation this evening is a sad and sometimes surreal look at the life of Maria Callas, the renowned and influential soprano, whose dramatic life proved irresistible to paparazzi and gossip columnists throughout her professional career. In 2006, Opera News wrote that "nearly thirty years after her death, she's still the definition of the diva as artist - and still one of classical music's best-selling vocalists."

It's September 1977. Callas lives in an apartment in Paris, with her faithful staff and beloved poodles. The film depicts her as a lonely shadow of her former self, secluded and addicted to a sedative drug (Mandrax) but still attempting to revive her career via private sessions with conductor Jeffrey Tate. She hallucinates the presence of a TV crew, led by a louche young filmmaker (also called Mandrax) and recalls episodes from her life in the resulting 'interviews.' We see her love affair with Greek business magnate Aristotle Onassis, which ended her marriage in 1957. She recalls a difficult relationship with her ambitious mother, the first stirrings of her signing talent during the Second World War, and the triumphant performances at La Scala, Covent Garden and the Met. Back in the present, Callas reconciles with her sister and visits her doctor,

who confirms that her declining health has affected her vocal range. Maria attends a final session with Tate but it becomes clear that her voice has indeed deteriorated. When a Le Figaro journalist who has spied on the session reveals himself and questions her future, her driver angrily pushes him away. Maria triumphantly sings "Vissi d'arte" from Tosca one last time alone in her apartment, leaving her windows open, having found peace with herself.

The director, Pablo Larraín, first found fame with his film 'No' about the 1988 referendum in his native Chile (shown by the Club in 2014). Maria is the third and final entry in his "Lady with Heels" trilogy of female-led biopics, following 'Jackie' (2016, with Natalie Portman as Jackie Kennedy) and 'Spencer' (2021, which starred Kristin Stewart as Diana, Princess of Wales). The writer Steven Knight penned 'Dirty Pretty Things' (2002) as well as 'Spencer' but is probably best known for TV's 'Peaky Blinders' and the recent 'SAS: Rogue Heroes.' Intriguingly, he was also a co-creator of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' And talking of big paydays, Knight was recently announced as the writer of the next James Bond film.

The film is an opulent spectacle, dripping with couture and filmed in part at La Scala and on Onassis's actual yacht ('Christina O'). The cinematographer Edward Lachman was Oscar-nominated. Much was made of Angelina Jolie's voice training, as she undertook 7 months of opera lessons to prepare for the role. As might be expected, for the scenes set during Callas' heyday, original recordings were used, with Jolie lip-synching. However, Jolie's own voice was apparently used in the film's final act.

Critical reaction was not universally positive, with The Times particularly unimpressed "punctuating a movie with Jolie in Callas costume, in close-up, valiantly mouthing to camera the best bits of Tosca, Medea, La Traviata and beyond, is problematic at best. At worst it's deeply distracting with shades of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. It is wilfully, wearily flat." More positively, the Telegraph gushed that "Jolie is given ample space to dazzle, but less to surprise. Dazzle she does though, with a fine understanding of just how camp she can go without proceedings becoming too operatic for their own good." Empire commented that "Jolie is staggeringly good...her humanity, sensitivity and loneliness aching through the screen."

The film's global box office (\$25m) was judged respectable but (as with many films these days) it was screened theatrically for just 1 week in a few cities in the US (to trigger Oscar qualification) before moving to Netflix. In my view, it's better suited to a big screen with big sound – I suspect it's what Callas herself would have wanted...

Waiter: Madame. Perhaps we can find you a seat inside.

Maria Callas: I'm not hungry. I come to restaurants to be adored.

Eugene Smith



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Club website: [www.wncc.org.uk](http://www.wncc.org.uk). Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to [reactions@wncc.org.uk](mailto:reactions@wncc.org.uk) by Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> October  
**Discs of most of our previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.**

## Maria Callas – The Final Act

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0026d5x/maria-callas-the-final-act>

The above programme was shown on BBC2 last December, and provides a fuller perspective on Callas's life. An extract from the notes on the website are shown below.

Known for her glamour and temper as much as her voice, Callas was the great classical diva of modern times.

There was one thing that mattered to her more than anything – her astonishing, life-changing voice, and the real tragedy of her story is that she lost it far earlier than people think. This film is a detective story: what was it that made Callas lose her voice and how early in her career did it begin to deteriorate?

**Musicologist Will Crutchfield** has studied the development of Callas's voice and he believes it had a fatal flaw, a 'wobble' detectable in her very earliest recorded performances. In order to uncover where this came from, it's necessary to understand how Callas became an icon. Through a cast of deeply knowledgeable contributors and compelling archive this film unpacks Callas's early life, how she was trained in opera singing, and what happened to her when she became a fêted soprano.

**Conductor Richard Bonyng** talks about watching her perform in her prime. 'She had this incredible gift. And when she walked on the stage you knew something was happening... She kept you spellbound.' **Sir Simon Schama** recounts how, as a 19-year-old, he was lucky enough to see Callas perform Tosca at the Royal Opera House in 1964. Callas's performance enraptured the young Schama: 'She was apparently on the downward slope. I had no idea about that. For me this voice was absolutely majestic.'

**Daisy Goodwin**, author of *Diva*, a novel about Callas's life, deconstructs the Onassis myth, the sexist assumption that Callas's eventual downfall was due to a man. The relationship perhaps offered Callas a way out when she already knew her

voice was failing. Why do we so often fall into the trap of seeing great female artists through the lens of their love lives and not their art?

**Biographer Sophia Lambton** explores the possible effects of the extreme weight loss that Callas experienced in the early 1950s, after which she was transformed into a global fashion – as well as an opera – star. Through the 1950s and 60s, her glamour became part of her global appeal. **Tommaso Pagani**, curator of a private Callas archive collection in Italy, reveals a treasure-trove of personal photos that show Callas at her most unguarded.

So, why did Callas lose her voice? According to Crutchfield, the way Callas pushed her voice to extremes ultimately exacerbated her fatal flaw: 'I think it gave her certain advantages that meant a lot to her. One of the things that everyone observes about Callas is this quality of stillness and intimacy. I think cultivating this little private voice gave her a range of colours that she knew she could use to magical effect. And I think she loved that.'



**This is the story of Maria Callas as it's never been told before: the tragedy of a woman who knew she was the greatest, but also knew that her greatness could not last.**

Comments and reactions to: **Conclave** (shown 11<sup>th</sup> September 2025)

No of reaction slips received = 34

Average score = 8.15

|       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |   |    |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|----|
| Score | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8  | 9 | 10 |
|       | ~ | ~ | ~ | ~ | ~ | ~ | 2 | 6 | 14 | 9 | 3  |

Our top-rating film of the season so far!

But how does it compare to our other recent opening titles? Rather well....

| Position | Year        | Opening Film of Season    | Score       | Reactions |
|----------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1        | 2017        | Lion                      | 8.46        | 52        |
| <b>2</b> | <b>2025</b> | <b>Conclave</b>           | <b>8.15</b> | <b>34</b> |
| 3        | 2018        | Darkest Hour              | 8.08        | 37        |
| 4        | 2024        | The Great Escaper         | 7.96        | 26        |
| 5        | 2015        | The Theory of Everything  | 7.84        | 32        |
| 6        | 2022        | The Duke                  | 7.75        | 19        |
| 7        | 2021        | Nomadland                 | 7.13        | 24        |
| 8        | 2023        | The Banshees of Inisherin | 7.06        | 18        |
| 9        | 2016        | Carol                     | 6.97        | 29        |
| 10       | 2019        | Stan and Ollie            | 6.92        | 25        |

**100% brilliant – script, sets, acting**

Enjoyable, well-acted film with a clever plot

**Ralph Fiennes delivered a knock-out performance** Superb – Ralph Fiennes was excellent

An amazing film. Acting and direction very good. This is the second time I've seen it and it was well worth it!

All's well that ends well!

**Well-acted**

Great film to begin the season – splendid performance by Ralph Fiennes

**Brilliant film – Ralph Fiennes should have won the Oscar!** [Adrien Brody won for The Brutalist]

I found the music too drastic.

**My second viewing and well worth it**

Good start to the season. Also enjoyed the “Look at Life” film too

**Difficulty seeing the subtitles (I moved). Second half much better than the first!**

What a great start to the season!

**Had me gripped throughout. The film rested on Ralph Fiennes and he was excellent.**

**A great start to the season.**

Excellent choice – and excellent programming coming up!

Forthcoming attraction: 9<sup>th</sup> October – **Perfect Days**



A superb and moving combination of music and performance – Michael Palin

It should be boring – but never is...it carries more dramatic weight than several Marvel set-pieces and Tom Cruise motorbiking off a cliff put together – The Spectator

This beguiling film may trade in the tranquil security of routine, but makes an occasional, heart-quickenning case for the unexpected - Variety