Angelina Jolie as the tormented ‘Divina’ Callas at Venice

AFP – Angelina Jolie returns to the limelight at the Venice Film Festival on Thursday as Maria Callas, “La Divina”, whose rich voice, glamourous persona, and tragic love affair mesmerised audiences around the world.

In “Maria”, the modern-day movie star will strive to capture the transcendent dramatic presence and tormented life of one of opera’s most resplendent divas in a biopic from Chilean director Pablo Larrain.

The film that premieres on the Lido Thursday evening, on the festival’s second day, is the last in Larrain’s trilogy of movies about iconic real-life women – after 2021’s “Spencer” about Lady Di and 2016’s “Jackie” about Jacqueline Kennedy.

The director has said only a larger-than-life star in her own right could play the role of the American-born Greek singer.

Enter Jolie.

“This is the greatest diva of the 20th century, and who could play that?” Larrain told Vanity Fair last week.

“I didn’t want to work with someone that didn’t have that already. I needed an actress who would naturally and organically be that diva, carry that weight, be that presence. Angelina was there.”

Absent from the screen since 2021, the 49-year-old American actress and director has kept a relatively low profile even as her lengthy, acrimonious divorce from Brad Pitt continues to make headlines.

The public’s fascination with Jolie’s private life has parallels with Callas’s, whose stormy life and loves – including her relationship with the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, who left her for Jacqueline Kennedy – were similarly fodder for the tabloids.

But while the paparazzi will be out in full force Thursday, Jolie – who was spotted in the Venice heat Tuesday cloaked in a Christian Dior trench coat – will not cross paths with Pitt during her visit.

Pitt’s action comedy “Wolfs”, in which he and George Clooney play rival professional fixers, is playing out of competition on the Lido on Sunday, as purposely planned by festival organisers to avoid awkward encounters.

– ‘Very scary’ –

One of 21 films in competition for Venice’s prestigious Golden Lion prize, “Maria” centres on Callas’s final, isolated years in Paris in the 1970s, as she looks back at her life and career before her death at age 53 from a heart attack.

Jolie reportedly studied six months for the role, training herself to mimic the singer’s cadences and tones as the film mixes in her own voice with that of the celebrated soprano.

“You can’t make a movie like this with an actress that is not actually singing it,” Larrain told Vanity Fair.

“This is the real thing – it was very scary for her, but she did it.”

While some critics found flaws with Callas’s voice, it was nevertheless deeply expressive, able to impart dramatic intensity to any role, which combined with her beauty and majestic stage presence prompting frenzied standing ovations.

A towering talent with a tireless work ethic, Callas was often portrayed as a “temperamental” star, a label she rejected,

defending herself as a disciplined perfectionist with high standards.

She single-handedly revived the 19th-century bel canto operas of Donizetti, Rossini and Bellini – whose “Norma” was one of Callas’s signature roles.

Callas died in 1977.

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