

TheaterWeek

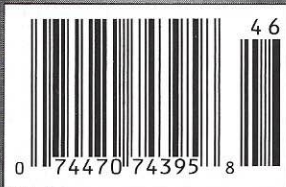
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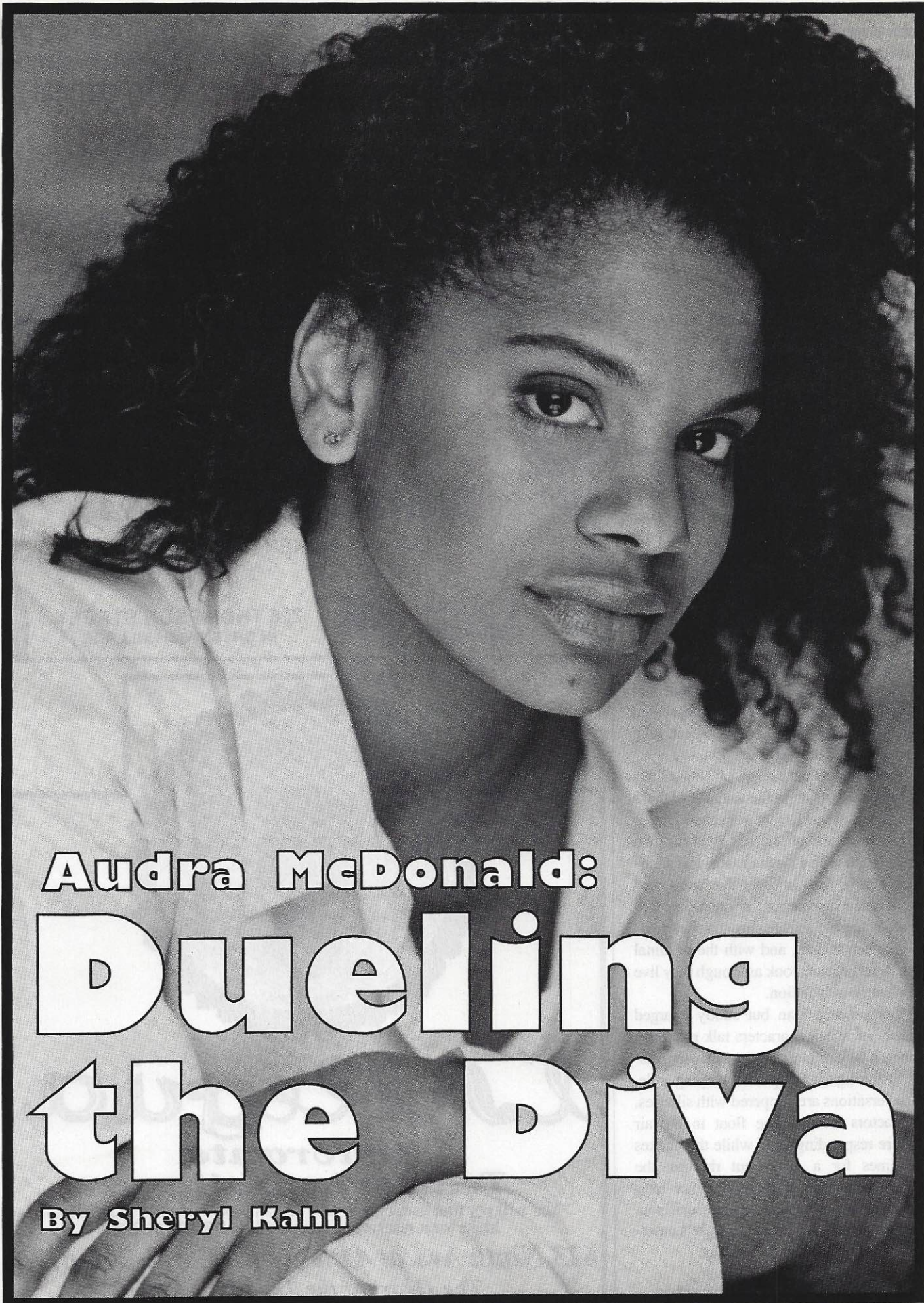
November 13, 1995

\$3.00
\$4.25 CANADA

Audra McDonald: Dueling the Diva

By Sheryl Kahn





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It's 24 hours until her first Broadway preview of *Master Class*, and Audra McDonald is having nightmares. "I'm in school," she recounts, still in pajamas at 11 a.m. in her Manhattan apartment. "I'm walking down this hallway to class. All of a sudden, I break out into a cold sweat because I realize I've forgotten my shoes and everyone is going to laugh at me. I know it's ridiculous—but it woke me up from a sound sleep."

And who wouldn't forgive the 24-year-old actress for feeling just a bit jittery? She's opening in a new, much-hyped Terrence McNally play on November 5, singing and acting a demanding role every night opposite theater legend Zoe Caldwell, and getting over a nasty sinus infection. "It kept my understudy in business for half of the performances these last few weeks out of town," she says. Let's just say getting here, in this role, has not been easy.

In fact, McDonald originally refused to audition at all. Though a 1994 Tony Award, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle winner for her performance as Carrie Pipperidge in *Carousel*, she was terrified of trying out. "I thought I'd make a big fool out of myself," she admits. Her character, Sharon, is a student in a Juilliard Master Class taught by opera great Maria Callas. "She has to sing this impossible aria—*Vieni! taffretta* from Verdi's *Macbeth*, and when I heard that, I said nooo way! I just can't do it. So I bailed."

Luckily, her agent talked her into it when casting agents called to say they hadn't yet found the right actress for the role. "He said, 'What do you have to lose?' I thought, well, my lunch..." But she summoned her courage, sang flawlessly, and was immediately cast.

Now, several months later, she knows her character inside and out. "She has this presence that makes even the great Callas a little jealous," she says. "Her emotions run the gamut and every night it's a complete journey. When I go home, I'm physically and emotionally exhausted." In a green ballgown, she towers over Callas, who goads her about her choice of evening wear: "Are you going somewhere after?"

McDonald brings to the play a touch of realism: She actually graduated from Juilliard in 1993. "I understand the psy-

che of the Master Class," she says. "I know what it feels like to be a voice student striving to be the best and the brightest." Students are invited to perform in a Master Class before a panel of teachers, peers and singing superstars. "I remember when I was in school Leontyne Price and Barbara Cook did one," she says. "And when she was alive, Callas actually did several."



Audra McDonald in *Master Class*. Jay Thompson

Students stand alone on a stage and perform. "Sometimes it's for five minutes, sometimes 40," she says. "Then the diva critiques you—and not always kindly."

McDonald says she never made it herself to the head of the class in Juilliard. "I wasn't good enough to make a Master Class," she says. "In fact, I think I spent most of my college years wondering if I had any talent at all. I remember hating the competition and the politics, but I'll say one thing: I learned, I really learned."

Nor does she think she'd ever want to be in a Master Class, especially after doing this role. "I used to wonder what I was missing out on—now I know and I'm glad I missed it! It can be a very brutal, life-altering experience. It can shatter a person."

The play features three students browbeaten by Callas. "I think each of their personalities is a compilation of a few

types of students you really find in Juilliard," she says. "You have some who are on ego trips, others who play the politics to get far, and others who are insecure."

Classmates who have seen the show say how true it is. "They tell me, 'That's exactly how I felt!' Which is really how we all want the audience to react. We want them to feel Callas breathing down their necks—the tension, fear, and thrill of being in her class all at once. It's a rollercoaster ride."

The same can be said of McDonald's career: "It's been one big blur," she says. One day, she was a kid from Fresno, California, dreaming of Broadway. "It seems like yesterday I was doing local dinner theater. I don't know how it happened—it's all surreal and maybe years from now it'll sink in—'Hey, Audra, you won a Tony, you starred in two Broadway shows before you were 25.' But now all I can think of are the butterflies in my stomach, and hitting those high notes. The show is the polar opposite of *Carousel*," she adds. "We used to joke that we had a cast of thousands," she laughs. "*Carousel* was a huge cast—and here, we're just five people. As Carrie, I was in one scene, off for a half hour. In this play, I'm on stage for a whole solid act, doing a dialogue. This to me is much more intense."

In the future, she'd like to do more plays—and possibly an opera. "Opera used to scare me," she says. "I would listen to Callas sing and think, Give it up! You'll never be able to do that. But everyone tells me I should try it."

One thing's for certain: she won't bail out on any more auditions. "Playing Sharon has given me more confidence," she says. "I'm learning the importance of having faith in yourself. First I worried I wouldn't win the Tony, and now that I have it, I feel like everyone is watching me—just daring me to prove I deserved it and it wasn't a fluke. I guess you can spend your life trying to be worthy—or trying to be wonderful."

As for her bad dream, McDonald has her own interpretation: "I think I'm just stressed over opening," she says. "I don't care how big a star you are—I bet even La Divina Callas got nervous on opening night. But you'd better believe I'm making sure I have my shoes before curtain."