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TELEVISION

Masters inspire awe, bright ideas



Kristofer Wellman, left, discusses his play with Edward Albee, center. This is the most important thing that's ever happened to me, Wellman said.

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IF YOU WATCH

The nine-part "Masterclass" series airs on HBO as follows:

- 5:30 p.m. Sunday: Placido Domingo
5 p.m. April 25: Liv Ullmann
5:30 p.m. May 2: Edward Albee
5:45 p.m. May 9: Jacques D'Amboise
3:45 p.m. May 15: Olafur Eliasson
7 p.m. June 9: Frank Gehry
6:30 p.m. June 13: Bill T. Jones
7 p.m. June 18: Michael Tilson Thomas
6:30 p.m. June 27: Julian Schnabel

BY JORDAN LEVIN JLEVIN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

The most powerful presence in Masterclass, the new HBO series pairing celebrated artists and aspiring students that premieres Sunday night, is not classical singer Placido Domingo, architect Frank Gehry or playwright Edward Albee. Nor is it their ardent, talented acolytes. Instead, the most compelling impression in each of the nine half-hour segments is made by art's capacity to astonish, transform and captivate, whether for the decades these illustrious artists have been creating or for the teenagers just starting out.

Over and over, the masters push the students to take chances, try harder, challenge their thoughts -- to understand and make art better.

"I think that art can change the world," says installation artist Olafur Eliasson, who constructed four giant waterfalls in New York Harbor. "Art is a kind of goggles that makes you see things differently."

Teachers and students demonstrate a passion that supersedes ego and ambition. "Music is not about whether you're scared or will blow everyone away," says Tavi Ungerlieder, a cellist who gets to work with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas. "It's about the music."

The series grew out of the YoungArts program of Miami's National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts, which brings 150 young artists, selected from thousands of 17- and 18-year-olds across the country, to Miami each year for a week of classes, competition and performances. The HBO program expands the YoungArts vision of developing young artists to a national audience.

"One of our pitches to these great artists is 'You're not just teaching the three kids in the room; you're teaching the 20 million viewers who are gonna watch this,'" says Kirk Simon, who produced and directed Masterclass with Karen Goodman. The executive producer is Lynn Arison, who launched YoungArts in 1981 with her late husband, Carnival Cruise Lines founder and philanthropist Ted Arison.

Simon and Goodman, who have received four Oscar nominations (including one for an earlier documentary on YoungArts week), selected three to six students for each session, sending them to New York, Los Angeles, Berlin and Miami for a day or two with their idols. Some of the kids are confident, some hesitant. All are movingly awestruck.

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VIDEOS

"He's one of the three people I most look up to besides my parents and Jesus Christ," says young singer Rafael Moras, who practically weeps with happiness at meeting Domingo.

"I spend most of my time in the library trying to escape where I am," says Kristofer Wellman, an aspiring playwright who gets to discuss his script with Albee. "This is the most important thing that's ever happened to me."

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *Masterclass* is the glimpse it offers of these artists' thinking. The brief biographical sequences that start each segment show just enough to establish their achievements. Gehry's sequence, for example, features an amusing animated bit from *The Simpsons*. There are almost no personal revelations.

THE ASSIGNMENT

But we do get a sense, from the artists' words and teaching methods, of how their ideas and personalities drive their work. Gehry, known for daring, asymmetrical buildings such as the Disney Concert Hall, assigns his group -- which includes no architecture students -- to design a city in two days. His instructions are simultaneously practical ("You need a list of what's important") and liberating ("You have to have an idea of what you want to express. Don't be afraid."). Then he mostly leaves them alone to figure things out. The kids are initially dumbfounded, then exhilarated.

"A door has opened," says performance artist James Sprang of Miami.

Miami is a strong presence in the series, which features seven local students. The sessions led by Liv Ullman and Thomas took place here. We see Ullman sitting with the teens in Morningside Park and Thomas coaching at the Lincoln Theater in South Beach.

Eliasson, whose installations play with the way we see and think about the world, sends his group into Berlin with mirrors to come up with . . . something. As the teens play and puzzle, they find themselves thinking differently about the suddenly not-so-simple reality of people in parks and changing light.

"It changes the way you think and look at things," says Julie Zhu. Painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel (*Basquiat*) mostly talks about his work, but a glimpse of one of his films, in which a paralyzed man soars in his still-vital imagination, gives a sense of the outsize scale of the artist's vision.

GIVING FORM

Choreographer Bill T. Jones comes across as one of the most dauntingly intellectual and demanding personalities, setting three dancers, two actors, a choreographer and a writer to create an entire dance-theater piece. "Say no to too easy," Jones challenges them. "The thing that moves the world, we give it form." But Jones can't leave creating that form entirely up to them, stepping in to shape the piece.

Charismatic, impulsive former New York City Ballet star Jacques D'Amboise, on the other hand, takes his teenage dancers on an antic odyssey, rehearsing in a forest and performing in a small town hall before their final show at the celebrated Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

These elders want the next generation to serve art well.

"I'm very selfish," Albee says. "I teach because I want to read good poems, to read good novels and see good plays. And young people are going to be doing them."



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