



Duse, Eleonora (1859-1924)

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Eleonora Duse was one of the greatest actresses of her era, famous for her interpretations of Shakespearean roles and the heroines of nineteenth-century French drama, and for introducing the new drama of Ibsen and d'Annunzio. She was also famous for her tempestuous love affairs, primarily with men, but also with women.

Duse was born on October 3, 1859, allegedly in the third-class carriage of a train, near Vigevano, Italy. Her parents, Angelita Capeletto and Alessandro Duse, were part of a traveling troupe of actors, and she first performed with them at the age of four in a play based on Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

Her childhood, dominated by poverty and disrupted by constant travel, was punctuated by her mother's death when Eleonora was only thirteen years old. After her mother became ill, Duse took over her roles, portraying characters far too mature for her age. Her first critical success was at Verona in 1873, where she was acclaimed for her performance in *Romeo and Juliet*. But her career really began in 1879 when she appeared in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*.

In Naples, Duse met the young journalist Mattino Cafiero and had her first serious love affair. It ended in disaster: Cafiero abandoned her in mid-pregnancy, her baby died, and shortly thereafter Cafiero died as well. Duse then joined Cesare Rossi's company where she met Teobaldo Checchi, a fellow actor whom she married in 1881. Although they had a daughter, for Duse, whose career now preoccupied her, the marriage had become a mere convenience.

In 1885 Duse embarked on a South American tour with the Cesare Rossi Company. After Checchi learned of her affair with fellow actor Flavio Ando, the relationship with her husband dissolved for good.

After her return from South America in 1886, Duse formed her own company. By this time she had built up a broad and varied repertoire including plays by Ibsen, Scribe, Zola, Corneille, Sardou, Shakespeare, and Euripides. Later she added Pirandello and Gorky to this list, but no playwright was ever more important to her than Gabriele d'Annunzio, whose plays she promoted and personally financed and produced.

Shortly after meeting in 1895, d'Annunzio and Duse became lovers and the relationship, interrupted by Duse's tours through Europe and the United States, remained frenzied and intense. From 1900 to 1911 Duse rented a villa at Settignano, Florence, her first real home, and for a brief period her life with d'Annunzio was productive and idyllic as well as passionate.

The first two years of the century marked the closest collaboration between the two, but this calm was soon to come to an end. Their life together was marred by betrayals and jealousies: d'Annunzio gave the lead role in *La Città morta*, which he claimed to have written for Duse, to her prime rival, Sarah Bernhardt; he had a series of dalliances; and finally, d'Annunzio's manager had to stop Duse from burning down his



Top: A portrait of Eleonora Duse by John Singer Sargent.

Above: A photographic portrait of Duse (1896). Photographic portrait of Eleonora Duse courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

house.

While Duse was best known for her tempestuous love affairs with men, she also had affairs with women that were at least rumored to be lesbian. In 1909, Duse began a relationship with a rebellious young feminist who had been the lover of writer Sibilla Aleramo and who dressed as a man, Lina Poletti. This affair was intense and romantic and almost certainly consummated physically.

Duse's relationship with the dancer Isadora Duncan was also rumored to be sexual. Duse spent several weeks with her at Viareggio, the seaside resort, in 1913, shortly after the dancer's two children drowned in a tragic accident.

Duse was also known for mentoring many young actresses in her company, most notably Emma Grammatica; and she shared a lasting and intimate friendship with the singer Yvette Guilbert. She also savored a long friendship with the costume designer Jean Philippe Worth, who was utterly devoted to her.

It should be noted, however, that Duse held the Church in high regard and expressed concern, if not guilt, about how her life as an actress had subsumed her role as wife and mother.

For many years Duse was plagued by illness and was periodically ordered by her doctors to retreat from the theater. Although she retired from the stage in 1911, she resumed work in 1921. What followed was a series of engagements in major European cities, including London--always accompanied by an oxygen tank.

In 1923, Duse embarked on a final American tour. The tour was to cover twenty cities, after which she planned to retire to the Italian countryside. Although her health was visibly waning, Duse refused to halt the tour.

On April 21, 1924, nearing the end of her tour, Duse performed in Pittsburgh at the Syrian Mosque. While her performance was stunning, Duse nearly collapsed while taking her bows. She developed a fever that soon escalated, then she lapsed into a coma on Good Friday. On Easter morning she asked to see her actors, and the next day she died.

Duse's body lay in state for six days in Pittsburgh and was then brought to New York, where her hearse led a funeral procession directly to the pier of the liner Duilio, which returned her body to her beloved Italy. She was buried in the cemetery of St. Anne at Asolo.

Eleonora Duse died as she was born--in transit. Nevertheless, her acting left an indelible mark in the world of theater. She was noted for promoting subtlety and restraint on the stage and for avoiding the theatrical and artificial. She gained fame all over the world and became, with Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, one of the greatest actresses of her time.

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