



HEROES OF THE CREATIVE SPIRIT:

Eleanora Duse

1858-1924

Eleanora Duse broke open a new dimension of possibility and expression for the stage actor: wearing little or no make-up or elaborate costumes, relying on none of the stock gestures, melodramatic emotions or line recitations of the theater of her time, Duse would so wholly enter her roles as to feel her character's feelings and think their thoughts from the inside out. And although this approach of reaching inside oneself to find a connection to the inner truth of a character would eventually become widely known as Method Acting, Duse came to it naturally, on her own, preceding even the legendary Stanislavsky.

To accomplish such a merging with character required of Duse nothing less than a virtual annihilation of self—for it was only when she got herself completely out of the way that the magic of another world could enter and speak clearly through her. In Eva Le Gallienne's *The Mystic in the Theatre*, she points out the striking parallel between this pursuit of “self-naughting” with the path of the religious mystic. And Duse, clearly a contemplative and a spiritual seeker her whole life,

“ Then, suddenly, I saw it happen – this thing that I had always dreamed of. I saw the stage take on an added dimension; I felt the vast audience grow still and sit as though mesmerized in the presence of a frail, worn woman who, with no apparent effort, through the sheer beauty of the truth within her, through the sheer power of her spirit, reached out to each one of us and held us all enthralled. I saw ‘the impossible’ come true. ”

—Eva Le Gallienne, on Eleanora Duse
from *The Mystic in the Theatre*

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desired above all else to bring to her art the channeling of higher forces for which she considered herself merely a messenger, her work not so much performance as spiritual service.

Yet despite how it appears, such transcendent creative transmission does *not* come naturally, even to the great performers. Duse's powerful stage presence may have made her work *look* like an effortless, natural gift, but as with any great artist, this seeming ease was entirely built on her early years of arduous and at times grueling, unrelenting study of technique and craft, a never-ending process to which she remained devoted her entire life. And yet, the more spiritually sensitive among her audiences often left the theater "silent and reverent, as though they had indeed been in the presence of a messenger of God."¹ Even more telling is the fact that Duse often performed in her native language to foreign audiences who understood not a word of Italian! But as a critic wrote in 1896, "The language she really speaks is not Italian. It is the universal human language...She touches that universal chord of emotion and impulse which runs from heart to heart through the whole human race..." Ordinarily one wouldn't consider the world of theatre to be a suitable arena in which to pursue the path of the mystic, for the elements of applause, glitter, money and publicity usually combine to make even serious practitioners of the craft little more than subjects of cultish personality worship.

But for Duse, theatre was "a great force capable of spreading beauty and understanding, whose function it was to quicken in the minds and hearts of the people an appreciation of the nobility of suffering, to awaken in them a sense of the sublime; to rouse them from their torpor and through a heightening of the emotions make them aware of the mystery and wonder of the human spirit."²

But neither the artist's nor the mystic's life is ever a smooth ride, and Duse's was no exception. Prone to bouts of extreme melancholy and withdrawal, as well as to manic bursts of exuberance, Duse exhibited the passionate and wild nature of extremes common to many artists, along with many passionate and heart-bursting love relationships and the birth and tragic death of a child.

A contemporary of both Isadora Duncan and Sarah Bernhardt, Eleanora Duse also counted Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw among her admirers.

She was born into a poor family of itinerant players, walking from town to town to eke out a living, often performing for starvation wages and living in dismal conditions of poverty. Her first appearance on the stage was as Cosette in *Les Miserables*, at the age of four. The story is told that since Cosette was to enter weeping, the young Duse was whipped in the wings. At 14, Duse triumphed as Shakespeare's Juliet, and touched for the first time the revelation that was to shape her life's work, an event described later by a fictitious character in a novel about her, but clearly based on Duse's own words: "Ah grace! The state of grace! Each time it is given me to touch the summit of my art I recover that unspeakable abandonment."

Such a state of self-abandonment is indeed beyond words, and is the very source of both true art and the mystical experience. It is a state of creative grace that is the very opposite of what we normally think of as "self-expression" in the arts. For it is only when the ordinary ego-self is temporarily obliterated or set aside, that the greater mysteries of Being have an opportunity to speak, and it was to this fundamental Mystery that Eleanora Duse was devoted as servant, messenger and seeker.

After an illustrious career touring the world in both her own and other's theatre companies, Duse left the stage in 1909 at the age of 51, choosing a life of relative solitude for the pursuit of her true life goal, to become, as Arthur Symons wrote of her, "an artist of her own soul."

In 1923, at age 65, motivated by financial need, Duse returned to the stage for a final tour that staggered audiences—her time away had only increased the spiritual power of her presence and subtle eloquence of her performance. Though certainly older and more frail, "A quality that was almost saintly had grown in her and seemed to vibrate all around her," author Edouard Schneider wrote, "Her art had become a clear channel of spiritual communion between her and the public."

But a year later, Eleanora Duse contracted pneumonia while performing in Pittsburgh and died there; her body was returned to Italy and buried in the foothills of the Dolomites, not far from Venice. Her last words, uttered in the arms of her beloved attendant of many years, were, "Pack the trunks. We must move on!"

—E.S.

¹ *ibid*

² *The Mystic in the Theatre*, Eva le Gallienne