



Eleanora Duse

Helen Sheehy

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A new biography, the first in two decades, of the legendary actress who inspired Anton Chekhov, popularized Henrik Ibsen, and spurred Stanislavski to create a new theory of acting based on her art and to invoke her name at every rehearsal.

Writers loved her and wrote plays for her. She befriended Rainer Maria Rilke and inspired the young James Joyce, who kept a portrait of her on his desk. Her greatest love, the poet d'Annunzio, made her the heroine of his novel *Il fuoco* (The Flame). She radically changed the art of acting: in a duel between the past and the future, she vanquished her rival, Sarah Bernhardt. Chekhov said of her, "I've never seen anything like it. Looking at Duse, I realized why the Russian theatre is such a bore." Charlie Chaplin called her "the finest thing I have seen on the stage." Gloria Swanson and Lillian Gish watched her perform with adoring attention, John Barrymore with awe. Shaw said she "touches you straight on the very heart."

When asked about her acting, Duse responded that, quite simply, it came from life. Except for one short film, Duse's art has been lost. Despite dozens of books about her, her story is muffled by legend and myth. The sentimental image that prevails is of a misty, tragic heroine victimized by men, by life; an artist of unearthly purity, without ambition.

Now Helen Sheehy, author of the much admired biography of Eva Le Gallienne, gives us a different Duse—a woman of strength and resolve, a woman who knew pain but could also inflict it. "Life is hard," she said, "one must wound or be wounded." She wanted to reveal on the stage the truth about women's lives and she wanted her art to endure.

Drawing on newly discovered material, including Duse's own memoir, and unpublished letters and notes, Sheehy brings us to an understanding of the great actress's unique ways of working: Duse acting out of her sense of her character's inner life, Duse anticipating the bold aspects of modernism and performing with a sexual freedom that shocked and thrilled audiences. She edited her characters' lines to bare skeletons, asked for the simplest sets and costumes. Where other actresses used hysterics onstage, Duse used stillness.

Sheehy writes about the Duse that the actress herself tried to hide—tracing her life from her childhood as a performing member of a family of actors touring their repertory of drama and commedia dell'arte through Italy. We follow her through her twenties and through the next four decades of commissioning and directing plays, running her own company, and illuminating a series of great roles that included Emile Zola's Thérèse Raquin, Marguerite in Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*, Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Hedda in his *Hedda Gabler*. When she thought her beauty was fading at fifty-one, she gave up the stage, only to return to the theatre in her early sixties; she traveled to America and enchanted audiences across the country. She died as she was born—on tour.

Sheehy's illuminating book brings us as close as we have ever been to the woman and the artist.

From the Hardcover edition.

Eleanora Duse Details

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From Reader Review Eleanora Duse for online ebook

Kristine says

Interesting if you like biographies, and stage actresses.

Andrea Izzy says

This book starts with a lot of interesting and fascinating detail, but eventually descends into a mediocre list of information flung together. The author's attempt to package information or themes creates a very confusing chronological story when the dates skip around. But overall, I think the book is successful, as it gives a full sense of Duse and what she achieved in her art and life, in addition to what she sacrificed.

Bmfoa says

This book moved me deeply. It was a balm when I read it.

K. says

Badly written to the point of being drivel. Duse is very important to me (I once spent a year and a half of my life writing a play about her), and I was surprised to see this newish biography and hoped it might have insights to offer. No. Apparently this Sheehy woman grinds things out to a formula, mostly for young adults. I'm shocked to discover that it is possible to write an uninspired and uninspiring biography of such a brilliant and inspiring woman. If you want to know about Duse, skip this and get Eva LeGallienne's book instead. LeGallienne didn't consider herself a writer (and wasn't much of one), but her love for Duse and her understanding of Duse's character made her book powerful. Skip Weaver as well. I'm still waiting for a really good biography. Maybe I'll have to write it myself.

Lisa Van Oosterum says

I truly did love this book, but as with many biographies about amazing people, it is tough to tell if i loved the book or Eleonora Duse.
