



Eleanora Duse

October 3, 1858—April 21, 1924

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 there-

after 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, Sardau, 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 house.

While Duse was best known for her tempestuous love affairs with men, she also had affairs

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