

Emily Shaffer
Dramaturg
A Divine Kerfuffle

Eleanora Duse

Born October 3rd, 1858, to parents Alessandro Vincenzo Duse and Angelica Cappelletto, near Vigevano, Italy, Eleanora was immersed into the theatre world almost immediately. A majority of her family were actors in a touring group, which happened to be the same group she made her first appearance in. Duse, at the age of four, made an appearance as Cosetta in a production of *Les Misérables*. She stayed with the touring group until her family passed, which



Figure 1: Eleanora Duse

is when she began moving from one company to another. Duse played the lead in Emile Zola's *Therese Raquin* in 1878, which got her in the eyes of critics.

In 1881, Eleanora married Tebaldo, an actor in the company she currently was at. They had a child, Enrichetta. Soon after her birth Eleanora and Tebaldo split due to an unhappy marriage.

In 1882, Eleanora Duse got to see Sarah Bernhardt perform in a contemporary French play. She needed to find a way to increase the interest of Italian audiences, because they seemed to have grown bored of the standard theatre productions. It really inspired Eleanora to give contemporary work by French dramatists

a try. For the next three years she acted in plays by Alexandre Dumas, the first role being Lionette in *La Princesse de Bagdad*. Then Cesarine in *La Femme de Claude*. In 1885 Duse toured South America with actor-manager Cesare Rossi. The tour ended and Eleanora made her return to Italy. She felt inspired and formed her own company, the Drama Company of the City of Rome. Duse travelled throughout Europe and the U.S. with her company.

In 1894, Eleanora Duse fell in love with Gabriele D'Annunzio, an uprising young poet. They collaborated with each other, helping each career grow. Duse financed his career, and he wrote several plays for her. D'Annunzio later tried novel writing and wrote a novel about the story of their love, titled *Il fuoco*. Duse loved D'Annunzio's plays, but also fell in love with Ibsen's plays. Roles she adored were Nora in *A Doll's House*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*, and Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*.

George Bernard Shaw, British Playwright, was in awe of Duse's skill of producing an illusion of, "being infinite in variety of beautiful pose and motion." A critic of Duse wrote that she was what's between the lines, she played the transitions. To watch her was to read a psychological novel.

In 1909, Duse retired from the stage due to her health. During World War 1, she suffered financial losses and had to come out of retirement in 1921. Her health was declining, but her acting ability was still intact. In 1923, Eleanora began a journey to the U.S. on her last tour. The tour ended in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she unfortunately passed away. Per her request, her body was taken back to Italy where she was buried in the cemetery of Asolo

Places to Visit

Grand Hotel des Iles Borromees

- Located in Stresa near Lake Maggiore.
- Beautiful view of the Borromean Islands and the Alps.
- Eleanora Duse and Gabriele D'Annunzio were amongst other well-known figures to stay here.
- <https://www.histouring.com/en/historical-places/grand-hotel-des-iles-borromees/>

Sources

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