

RESTORATION

By **MARK ROSATI**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Rough notes...Mephistophelian...moves from dialogue exchange to existential interrogation...seamlessly, without noise or colour, from material reality to transcendent reality—the dead looking down upon themselves, the taste of life still bittersweet on their lips—Falconetti has merged so closely with her—and the world’s conception of her as the supreme actress--that the illusion has taken hold and truth has been pushed aside...’to spend the rest of your life lost in your own shadow.’ Nostalgic, haunting/Sunset Boulevard/The rescue and restoration of a famous lost film is poignantly played against the fragmentation of the actress it made famous and the disintegration of her legendary career...dear god, the heartbreak of it all...(Spacing is the playwright’s own).*

RESTORATION

A Play in One Act

By Mark Rosati

CHARACTERS

Renee Falconetti, a French actress, 20s or 30s

A male bartender, age unimportant

The play is set in a bar in South America at some point in the past.

RESTORATION – INTRODUCTION

In 1927, a Paris stage actress capped her brief motion picture career by filming a silent film role. Renee Jeanne Falconetti's haunting performance in the title role of Carl Th. Dreyer's classic "The Passion of Joan of Arc" is considered perhaps the greatest in cinematic history. Falconetti never made another movie, and she died in obscurity in South America in 1946. Mystery surrounds her, including the cause of her death, the country in which she died, the exact number of films she made (some accounts have it as one, others two or three), and even her correct full name. The body of Falconetti, best known for portraying a woman who was burned alive, was cremated, and her ashes buried in her native France. For decades it was believed that Dreyer's masterwork was lost when the negatives were destroyed in fires, but a copy of the film was found in a Norwegian mental institution in 1981 and digitally restored to its former glory.

RESTORATION

(A bar in South America. The light rises, revealing RENEE FALCONETTI, a French actress, and BARTENDER. The BARTENDER is always polite on the surface, but there is a probing, sinister undertone to his questions and banter.)

FALCONETTI

To create. That is all we will ever know of God.

BARTENDER

Not if you're a believer.

FALCONETTI

Is there a difference between a believer and a fool? Or a lunatic?

BARTENDER

Damned if I know.

FALCONETTI

Do you believe in perfection?

BARTENDER

I would if I ever saw it.

FALCONETTI

If you create something perfect, will it live forever? Will its creator?

BARTENDER

Nothing is immortal.

FALCONETTI

At this point I hoped to have more answers, not more questions.

BARTENDER

Life's disappointments don't die with us.

(FALCONETTI takes out a cigarette. The BARTENDER lights it for her.)

FALCONETTI

We all die more than once, don't we? I died the first time when my lover passed away. The second time, when I was forgotten--

BARTENDER

You know that's not the same.

FALCONETTI

The hell it isn't. I stood at the pinnacle, the greatest performance ever filmed, that would ever be filmed, and to be condemned to oblivion --

BARTENDER

That's different than dying. You of all people should know that.

FALCONETTI

And then the fires. That was my third death, when the negatives were destroyed. "The Passion of Joan of Arc" -- and I -- not just forgotten. Erased. Our masterpiece, my Joan, became a rumor, a fable, people heard of it but never saw it. The public adored me and then forgot me, like a lover from a summer fling. Twenty years later, you can't remember the color of her eyes or what she was wearing the last time you saw her. Can you?

BARTENDER

Some people can.

FALCONETTI

And then a miracle, for it to be found, 35 years later--

BARTENDER

Risen from the grave. A perfect copy found in a janitor's closet at a Norwegian mental institution. How did it get there of all places?

FALCONETTI

How does anything get anywhere? But they found it, just like they found the "Mona Lisa" after it was stolen. And they restored the film, beautifully, lovingly.

BARTENDER

Still--

FALCONETTI

Hardly anyone ever watches it.

BARTENDER

That must be very painful for you.

FALCONETTI

I'm like Proust. No one reads his masterwork, no one sees mine.

BARTENDER

But you were magnificent. So I've heard.

FALCONETTI

You haven't seen it either?

BARTENDER

Can't say that I have.

FALCONETTI

I wasn't an actress, I became a ghost of a woman who was martyred and haunts the soul of every Frenchwoman. The director was so cruel, like something out of Dickens or Tolstoy, hours and hours forcing me on my knees, hungry, cold, to torture every emotion out of me. But we gave birth to something, something eternal, something French, something universal--

BARTENDER

Even though you were so much older than Joan was.

FALCONETTI

Find me another actress at 35 who could play 19 without makeup. But that was just the face, the body. I gave my soul for that performance--

BARTENDER

I heard it looked like you were really crying.

FALCONETTI

I was really crying. I had hoped to charm Dreyer, the director, out of my promise to shear off my hair, but Carl was immune to charms -- mine, anyway. To cut off a woman's hair is to de-sex her.

BARTENDER

Fitting, considering you were playing a woman killed for wearing men's clothes.

FALCONETTI

Yes, a man would say it's fitting.

BARTENDER

I thought you liked men.

FALCONETTI

I was a stage star in Paris, and men wanted me. I had furs and jewelry and a limousine with a chauffeur. Henri-- the Jewish industrialist who fathered my children --

BARTENDER

He died the year after "Joan" was released, didn't he?

FALCONETTI

When I went to sleep the night of his funeral, no bed ever seemed so silent, so empty. And then came the Depression, and no one wanted to put on the kinds plays I loved to stage. I wanted to sing and dance, but all the people wanted was to see me suffer and die, as nobly as possible. So I set up my own theater--

BARTENDER

But you weren't exactly a businesswoman, were you?

FALCONETTI

I was an actress nearing 40. That made me old. And Europe was in the process of committing suicide. Not a good time for musical theater.

BARTENDER

So you fled, you and your half-Jewish children to Switzerland. And then you abandoned them there and left for South America--

FALCONETTI

I provided for their care, the best boarding schools. I had to make a new life in the New World. Do you drag your children all across the globe with you?

BARTENDER

I wouldn't bring a child into this world.

FALCONETTI

Dreyer said I had reincarnated Joan, and perhaps that's why I was born, to give her life again. And I gave my children life. What about my own life?

BARTENDER

So you tried to reinvent yourself in Argentina, a strange country, no money, no contacts, putting on weight--

FALCONETTI

How do you have a second act when the first can never be equaled? I'm not educated but I read a lot. The German physicists talk about the atom and how nothing is real, it's only perception, until you see the electron smeared on a photographic film, that's reality. But I left more than a smear on film, I left transcendence, truth, and it will last--

BARTENDER

As long as there aren't more fires.

FALCONETTI

When I was a young actress, after the Great War, some of the soldiers had such terrible facial wound they didn't look human anymore. They lived in sheltered communities, deep in the forests, where no one would see them. But once a year they would gather to have contact with other people, and sometimes I would go and entertain them.

BARTENDER

Why?

FALCONETTI

I owed it to them as a Frenchwoman, for their sacrifice, for their mutilation. To sing, to dance for them -- a woman's beauty can rekindle a dead soul, restore him if only for a moment--

BARTENDER

What they say about war is also true of life -- long periods of boredom, punctuated by moments of sheer terror. And, sometimes, it leaves scars.

FALCONETTI

This last war - Dresden, Toyko, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. It seems the world's fate is to burn itself to death.

BARTENDER

Perhaps.

FALCONETTI

It's a wonder the bombs they dropped in Japan didn't go on splitting every atom on Earth.

BARTENDER

We got lucky -- except the Japanese, of course.

FALCONETTI

They called them World Wars but neither was, really. Most people in the world went about their business, their affairs, unaffected. Never even heard a gunshot. Some starved, but most went to bed with full bellies--

BARTENDER

Like you. You failed in theater here, too, then tried to make ends meet teaching acting and singing--

FALCONETTI

Hard enough to find students to teach in the midst of Depression and war. Those I had were idiots.

BARTENDER

Not worthy of your time or talent.

FALCONETTI

Would that I had Joan's faith. Her convictions, her purpose--

BARTENDER

So, instead, you ate a lot--

FALCONETTI

Yes, I gained weight. And I aged. Would that people could be reborn like lost films. Would that someone could reincarnate me like I did with her, bring me back to life, alive and young and vital--

BARTENDER

You tried to reincarnate yourself--

FALCONETTI

Yes, after the war, I was going to return to Paris and the stage. But I had to lose weight, and I lost so much I got sick and died in Buenos Aires--

BARTENDER

No. You had a breakdown, you became mentally unbalanced, and you committed suicide in Brazil.

FALCONETTI

That's a lie.

BARTENDER

You're guilty because you passed on your weakness to your son, who also killed himself.

FALCONETTI

Another lie! How dare you!

BARTENDER

It seems you were in need of a director for more than just motion pictures.

FALCONETTI

You will be forgotten an hour after your funeral. I—they—those who know me will remember me, and revere me, forever--

BARTENDER

Perhaps.

FALCONETTI

When I was in Brazil--

BARTENDER

Yes, Brazil.

FALCONETTI

This was in 1942, before I died --

BARTENDER

Uh-huh.

FALCONETTI

They screened a brilliant Brazilian film, "Limite." I was invited. So were many others, stars of the cinematic firmament, like Orson Welles. You know him?

BARTENDER

Of course. Citizen Kane.

FALCONETTI

He knew what it was like to have one giant triumph overshadow the rest of your life -- give it meaning and strip it of meaning at the same time.

BARTENDER

He also gained a few pounds later in life.

FALCONETTI

You're a cruel little man sometimes.

BARTENDER

Guilty as charged.

FALCONETTI

"Limite" -- it was about a small boat drifting on the ocean, three people stuck in it, all had lost hope, contemplating their shattered lives--

BARTENDER

Must have been painful for someone in your situation.

FALCONETTI

Afterward, Orson and I spoke, about spending the rest of your life trying to reincarnate past glory, a miracle of story, script, cast, director, of costumes and lighting, art becoming life, down to the flies buzzing around our faces. To be the best ever at what you did, to transcend and transform your art, to define it for every generation to follow--

BARTENDER

A heavy weight to carry.

FALCONETTI

To spend the rest of your life lost in your own shadow, everyone talking about you in the past tense. I asked him -- could we work together? Create something together?

BARTENDER

And?

FALCONETTI

He said, "In my opinion, there are two things that can absolutely not be carried to the screen: the realistic presentation of the sexual act and praying to God." But then he said--

BARTENDER

Yes?

FALCONETTI

He said, the exception was when he saw me in Joan of Arc, and realized what communion with God really is. When he saw it he thought he was seeing actual history, not a film. And then he said--

BARTENDER

Go on.

FALCONETTI

“A good artist should be isolated. If she isn't isolated, something's wrong.”

BARTENDER

Depressing way to live.

FALCONETTI

The last thing he said was, “If you want a happy ending, it depends on where you stop your story.” Then he kissed my hand and went back to America.

BARTENDER

Did you ever see him again?

(FALCONETTI shakes her head)

FALCONETTI

All I wanted was to leave one more brush stroke on the canvas.

BARTENDER

It was not to be.

FALCONETTI

“Joan of Arc” was based on the actual trial transcripts.

BARTENDER

So--?

FALCONETTI

Those men, those petty, vicious, frightened, small men, they actually kept records, like the Nazis, like they were proud of torturing and burning her, that it would scare off other heretics. And we took those records, and we turned it against them, showed them for what they were, and showed Joan to be the saint she was. It took 500 years for them to canonize her.

BARTENDER

Why so long, do you think?

FALCONETTI

Because when the world isn't being cruel to women, it's indifferent. But we don't really choose

the paths we follow, do we? We fool ourselves into thinking we do, but really, we just wake up floating in the middle of a river and pretend we're swimming. Creation -- all I will ever know of God.

(FALCONETTI extinguishes her cigarette)

FALCONETTI

Ashes to ashes. Cremation is the way to go, don't you think?

FALCONETTI takes out another cigarette and leans forward for a light.

The BARTENDER strikes a match and holds it out.)

FALCONETTI

Someone wrote that to look at me, is to look into eyes that will never leave you.

(staring into FALCONETTI'S eyes, the BARTENDER is transfixed. She blows out the match.)

THE END

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THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *My short play "Restoration" was born of insomnia. I awoke long after midnight, couldn't get back to sleep, turned on the television for channel flipping - and found myself face-to-face with Renee Falconetti in her extraordinary performance as Joan of Arc. I had known of the film but had never seen it - and I was transfixed. The play is a work of fiction, of course, but inspired by Falconetti's life and art, and the fascinating story of the film itself. The world can be a cruel place for artists of any kind - and, in my experience, women artists in particular.*

'Restoration' has been performed in New York City in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, the Midtown International Theatre Festival's Short Play Lab, and in Manhattan Repertory Theatre's 'February Event.' All were directed by Jake Alan King and starred Chelsea Clark as Falconetti; Guy Wellman played the bartender in three of the productions, and Julio Valentin performed the role in the fourth. I owe a great debt of gratitude to all of them.

BIO: *Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 23 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston, Michigan and Brighton, UK. Recent productions include “Exposed” in April 2019 at Between Us Productions’ Take Ten Festival in New York, “Duet” at Theatre East’s 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, “Restoration” in Between Us Productions’ Take Ten Festival, and “Extinct/Extant” at Manhattan Repertory Theatre’s February Event. His short story “Last Stand” was included in a public reading of new works on the theme of “sanctuary” by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton in June 2019, and his one-act “Our Daily Bread” received a public reading in Boston in the “Pinning Our Hopes” pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.*