

Eleonora Duse and the Open Air Theatres

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Abstract: *The actress Eleonora Duse had a particular attention to the outdoor performance, and a memorable moment in her long career was the juvenile staging of “Romeo and Juliet” in Verona. The impression of the audience and her emotions in the Roman Arena are described in the novel “The Flame of Life” (Il Fuoco), written by Gabriele d’Annunzio. Her artistic dream – shared with the Poet – was the building of an open air theatre in Albano Laziale, on the shores of the Lake: nothing came of this plan, but it would be an educational project aimed to the spiritual development of the people, creating a vital contact between Art and Nature. Duse’s desire of return to the en plein air dimension was also a form of avant-garde, as underlined Sheldon Cheney, considering the growth of the open air theatre movement in the 1910s and its importance for the new architectural design and the dramatic productions.*

Key-words: *Eleonora Duse; Gabriele d’Annunzio; Sheldon Cheney; open air theatre.*

1. Introduction

The actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) had a particular attention to the outdoor performance, which allowed her to refine her acting technique and her empathic relationship with the audience. In fact, the outdoor staging involves a careful study of the space that considers the acoustic problems, the variability of the light and other aspects related to the direct contact with Nature: the noise of the wind, the song of the birds, the danger of the rain, the possibility of working in a warm or hot day (because the open air theatres are usually used only in Spring and Summer).

In her long career, Duse’s outdoor performance was perfectionated at the Arena del Sole in Bologna, and at the Arena Nazionale in Florence. But her artistic dream – shared with Gabriele d’Annunzio (1863-1938) – was the building of an open air theatre in Albano Laziale, on the shores of the Lake: nothing came of this plan, but it would be an educational project aimed to the spiritual development of the people, creating a vital contact between Art and Nature.

The building of this new theatre would have been a renovating “answer” to the eternal spiritual need of mankind, linked to the aesthetical dimension of the performing arts and its effect on the human soul. They wanted to use a strategic place, where the feelings of the community (artists and audience) would have been perceived in a stronger way: this new theatre would have been an instrument for living and sharing emotions for the spiritual growth of the community, aimed to the research and the enjoyment of Beauty. In this way, it would have been considered as a vehicle of love for Art and Life, able to generate a collective catharsis. Moreover, its setting in a special environment – on the shores of the Lake Albano – would have been an invitation to love and respect Nature.

This remained an unfulfilled project, a brilliant intuition, an artistic dream. Perhaps, even the utopia of an actress and a poet. The new open air theatre in Albano Laziale would

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have been added to the other outdoor theatres already existing in Italy: those built in the classical period (ex. Greek Theatre in Siracusa, Greek Theatre in Taormina, Roman Theatre in Fiesole, Roman Theatre in Volterra), in the Italian noble residences (ex. Castle Regina Cornaro in Asolo) and in suggestive natural locations (ex. Pineta Dannunziana in Pescara).

From the historical point of view, the idea of Duse and d'Annunzio "provoked" a debate on the re-evaluation of the open air theatres in Italy (Isgrò 2009 and 2014). The first step, in this cultural enterprise, was the publication – in Spring 1900, and immediately translated into the major European languages – of the novel *The Flame of Life (Il Fuoco)*. The main characters are the poet Stelio Effrena (*alter ego* of d'Annunzio) and the actress Foscarina (*alter ego* of Duse). Remembering her adolescence and her wandering life with her family, Foscarina evokes her memorable outdoor performance in Verona. This episode gave her the full awareness of her vocation to be an actress.

2. Duse's Great Outdoor Performance in Verona

The most important moment of Duse's long career was the juvenile staging of *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona. The impression of the audience and her emotions in the Roman Arena are described in second part of the novel *The Flame of Life (Il Fuoco)*, entitled „The Empire of Silence”. D'Annunzio creates a long interior monologue in which the actress, after many years, expresses still living emotion:

One Sunday in May, in the immense arena in the ancient amphitheatre under the open sky, I have been Juliet before a popular multitude that had breathed in the legend of love and death. No quiver from the most vibrating audiences, no applause, no triumph has ever meant the same to me as the fullness and the intoxication of that great hour. Truly, when I heard Romeo saying, 'Ah, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!' truly my whole being kindled; I became a flame. I had bought a great bunch of roses with my little savings, in the Piazza delle Erbe, under the fountain of Madonna Verona. The roses were my only ornament. I mingled them with my words, with my gestures, with each attitude of mine. I let one fall at the feet of Romeo when we first met; I strewed the leaves of another on his head from the balcony; and I covered his body with the whole of them in the tomb. (D'Annunzio 1909, 320-321)

In order to create the character of Juliet, Duse used roses as scenic object. The contact with Nature, due to the work in an open air theatre, encouraged her inspiration to the highest level:

The air, the light, and their perfume ravished me. Words slipped from me with strange ease, almost involuntarily as in delirium, and together with them I could hear the continual accompaniment made by the dizzy throb of my veins; I could see the deep amphitheatre, half in sunshine, half in shadow, and in the illuminated part a glitter as of thousands and thousands of eyes. The day was a quiet one like to-day. There was not a breath to ruffle the folds of my dress or the hair that fluttered on my bare neck. The sky was very far, yet now and then it seemed as if any weakest words must sound in its farthest distances, like a clap of thunder, or that its blue was becoming so deep that I was coloured by it as by a sea water that was drowning me. And at intervals, my eyes would travel to the long grasses growing at the summit of the walls, and there seemed

to come to me from them I know not what encouragement to what I was saying and doing; and when I saw them sway at the first breath of wind that was rising from the hills, I felt my animation increase and with it the strength of my voice. (D'Annunzio 1909, 321)

Moreover, the voice of the actress was united to the song of the birds and – in the final scenes – to the mystery of the night. The transition from light to darkness, natural in an open air theatre, helped her to give depth to the human tragedy of Juliet:

How I spoke of the lark and the nightingale! I had heard them both in the country a thousand times. I knew all their melodies of the wood, the field, and the sky; I had them wild and living in my ears. Each word before leaving my lips seemed to have passed through all the warmth of my blood. There was no fibre in me which did not give forth an harmonious sound. Ah, grace! The state of grace! Each time it is given me to touch the summit of my art I recover that unspeakable abandonment. I was Juliet. 'It is day, it is day!' I cried out in my terror. The wind was in my hair. I could feel the extraordinary silence on which my lamentation fell. The crowd seemed to have disappeared below ground. It sat silent on the curved steps that were now in shadow. Above it the top of the wall was still red. I was telling of the terror of day, but I already truly felt 'the mask of night' on my face. Romeo had descended. We were already both dead, both had already entered into darkness. Do you remember? 'Now that you are there, you appear like a corpse at the bottom of a sepulchre. Either my eyes deceive me or you are very pale.' I was icy cold as I said these things. (D'Annunzio 1909, 321-322)

This great outdoor performance in Verona helped the actress to discover her *duende* – a divine gift, silent and strong – which can be compared to the sacred flame of Art (Pagani 2017). It burns only in a few selected artists: Eleonora Duse was one on such artist. In this occasion, she immediately perceived the impact of her outdoor performance on the audience:

My eyes sought the glimmer of light at the top of the wall. It had gone out. The people were clamouring in the arena, demanding the death scene; they would no longer listen to the mother or the nurse or the monk. The quiver of its impatience intolerably quickened the throbbing of my own heart. The tragedy was hurrying on. I still have the memory of a great sky white as pearls, and of a noise as of the sea that quieted down when I appeared, and of the smell of pitch that came from the torches, and of the roses that covered me being faded by my fever, and of a distant sound of bells that brought the sky nearer to us, and of that sky that was losing its light little by little as I was losing my life, and of a star, the first star, that trembled in my eyes with my tears... When I fell lifeless on the body of Romeo, the howl of the crowd in the shadow was so violent that I was frightened. Someone raised me up and dragged me towards that howl. Someone brought the torch close to my tear-stained face; it crackled hard and smelt of pitch and was red and black, smoke and flame. That too, like the star, I shall never forget. And my face must certainly have been the colour of death... Thus, Stelio, one night in May, Juliet came to life again and was shown to the people of Verona. (D'Annunzio 1909, 322-323)

3. Duse and the Open Air Theatre Movement

The eternal human desire to enjoy the open air theatre is described by Sheldon Cheney (1886-1980) in this way:

There comes a time, usually at the end of the season, when the breath of the stage faintly nauseates, and there is the desire to push out the confining walls, overdecorated, vulgarly gilded and stenciled, we note in these moments of reaction and to escape out under the stars and green trees. Suddenly, perhaps, we glimpse the possibility of a new theatre, a vision of an art compounded of acting, color, moving figures, poetry and the clear sky, stripped of all the artificialities and tawdriness of our indoor make believe. There comes, perhaps, a swift remembrance of a night in an improvised garden theatre, or an imagined picture of what the Greeks and Romans must have enjoyed in their immense bowl-like playhouses, roofless and nobly simple in spirit. That is the call of the open-air theatre. (Cheney 1919: 99)

In Cheney's opinion, the contact with Nature is the secret of the success of the outdoor theatre. This is a virtue, for the contemporary society and its frantic life:

What that virtue is, it is difficult to explain. That it belongs to productions in Greek theatres, nature theatres and garden theatres alike, and to improvised performances in woods or on lawns, is proof that it arises less from any particular bit of architectural or landscape beauty than from something that every producer is inspired to put into his work when he steps out under the open sky. First, it is a freshness, a freedom from all the inhibitions and artificialities that characterize indoor methods of presentation. It arises, perhaps, from a sincerity, a direct approach, a sensing of Nature's clear way as against man's complex way. It results in a lyric or pastoral loveliness, and in a clear responsiveness from audience to actors and play. (Cheney 1919: 101)

Moreover, the outdoor theatre could really improve the quality of life:

Truth, simple, authentic, unsophisticated truth to the primitive emotions and the love of beauty that remain in every one of us – that perhaps, is the unusual thing that the open-air production offers, the thing that beguiles us away from the roofed-in stage when the season-end longing comes. (Cheney 1919: 102)

In this way, the open air productions could be a relevant element for the artistic work of new groups. A natural setting for outdoor drama could be a new solution for those who wants to work in new performance spaces:

And so the tendency to produce plays, and to dance, and to present local pageants, informally and in the open air, in private gardens, on village greens, in parks and woods, seems more than a mere coincidence of many people seeking the same sort of amusement in similar ways. It marks, perhaps more clearly than any other sign, a swing away from the accepted system of turning the nation's dramatic destinies over to a group of specialists, in this case, more business men than artists. It marks a wide spread return of the impulse to express emotion dramatically – not only as players but as audience. And a

great play can succeed only when its spectators are themselves very truly artists at heart. The spread of informal open-air productions is in full keeping, too, with the temper of the times. In all directions we are reconsidering, reconstructing, and not infrequently destroying. We are breaking through the hard shells built up around our institutions, schools, churches, art galleries, theatres. We are gaining opportunities for self-expression – more by groups than as individuals – and we are building for widespread participation in the arts and for widespread appreciation of them. In these things casual dramatic production has its undoubted part and its undoubted value – particularly when that production brings the fineness, the sense of truth, the purging beauty, of open-air drama. To prepare for casual open-air production – which sounds perilously close to paradox – owners and builders of country estates may do much at small cost. The placing of a slightly raised bit of lawn at the end of a meadow, the skillful arranging of a pergola to allow a long vista from a sloping bank, or a re-arranging of the terraces about a pool to face a wide flight of garden stairs, may make all the difference between a mere garden and a garden with a theatre serviceable on a score of occasions through a summer. (Cheney 1919: 103)

Cheney's opinion is perfect also for a reflection on the outdoor stagings of the plays written by d'Annunzio: they were frequent, because he was a worldwide known author. For ex. in September 1927 he organized an acclaimed staging of his tragedy *The Daughter of Iorio* (*La Figlia di Iorio*) in the garden of the Vittoriale, his beautiful residence on Garda Lake. In August 1935 his tragedy *The Dead City* (*La Città Morta*) was staged in the open air theatre of the Castle in Asolo, and was dedicated to the memory of Eleonora Duse for the 10th anniversary of her death (Pagani 2018).

Duse was still alive when Cheney published his book *The Open-Air Theatre* (1918). Her desire of return to the *en plein air* dimension was also a form of avant-garde, considering the growth of the open air theatre movement in the 1910s and its importance for the new architectural design and the dramatic productions:

Eleonora Duse has said: "To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed; the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible... We should return to the Greeks, play in the open air; the drama dies of stalls and boxes and evening dress, and people who come to digest their dinner." Madame Duse probably had no idea of banishing all drama to the open. Perhaps she did see that a very vital and lovely sort of drama might be developed out-of-doors. But what she very certainly felt was this: that no current form of dramatic activity can be vital until the playwrights, the actors, the stage artists and the audiences, leaving behind all the trickeries and artificialities of the modern stage, go out into the open and learn the simplicity, the directness, and the joyousness of dramatic production under the sun and the stars. (Cheney 1918: 8)

Duse did not consider theatre as a pastime or an after dinner. In her experience, Theatre was a spiritual matter. Her dialogue with the audience, was always a question of soul (Pagani 2011). She realized her theatrical vocation thanks to an outdoor performance and, from this moment, she wanted to elaborate her message of Art and Life. For those who are in search of Beauty, this lesson is still alive. And it will never die.

4. Conclusions

Eleonora Duse died on tour in Pittsburgh, in April 1924. In the 1920s and the 1930s, the outdoor staging was still considered as one of the most advanced forms of avant-garde, and was relevant the position of Italian intellectuals such as Alessandro Romanelli (1923), Vincenzo Bonajuto (after 1927), Mario Corsi (1939) and others. In fact, with their books, they explained the theoretical aspects of this topic (also using very interesting and rare photos of the most important performances). After almost a century, this practice is still combined to the cultural heritage of the past, but is also linked to the artistic and social needs of the audience of the New Millennium. The emotional impact of the open air theatres is always a precious gift for the new generations. And it will never die, too.

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