

Eleonora Duse and the Emigration Magazine *Columbus* (1924)

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Abstract: *The death of Eleonora Duse (April 21, 1924) caused a great emotion among Italian emigrants in the United States, who experienced this tragic event as a fact that directly involved their community. In April 1924, the Italian-American monthly magazine Columbus dedicated a dossier to the great actress with contributions that paid homage to her artistic greatness and underlined the relevance of her figure in the cultural context of emigration. Also Gabriele d'Annunzio received that pages, and read them: with her last tour, the ambassador of Italian theatre in the world create a special union between Europe and America. This was the beginning of Duse's myth for the future generations.*

Keywords: *Eleonora Duse; Gabriele d'Annunzio; Columbus; Vittoriale; emigration;*

Introduction

The great Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) died at the Schenley Hotel (Suite 524) in Pittsburgh on April 21, 1924, while she on tour in the United States. Her death was announced by newspapers around the world and some Italian newspapers – with much controversy – compared her to an emigrant who had landed in the New World in search of fortune. Duse was an ambassador of Italian theater: she had always used the Italian language on stage and had managed to win over foreign spectators who, even if they did not understand the Italian speech, still understood the meaning of the performance because they were deeply touched by the power of her interpretation.

Among the first people who went to pay homage to the famous deceased were the consul Telesio Lucci and the ambassador Prince Gelasio Gaetani di Sermoneta. Her farewell became an authentic collective rite, also because Gabriele d'Annunzio had written to Benito Mussolini and managed to have a solemn state funeral². Duse's body was brought back to Italy at the government's expense by the ship "Duilio": her last earthly journey (I personally call it "a posthumous tour") toward her homeland began on May 1, 1924, after the funeral celebrated in the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer in New York.

The Atlantic crossing ended in the port of Naples, the city where Duse had lived the most significant moments of her artistic youth and her love affair with the journalist Martino Cafiero. In Rome, on May 11, 1924, the solemn state funeral was celebrated in the Basilica of S. Maria degli Angeli and, passing by train from Florence, Bologna and Padua, on May 12, 1924, the body arrived at the Convent of S. Anna in Asolo. Here took place the funeral vigil of her daughter Enrichetta with some close friends throughout the night, and on May 13, 1924, she was buried in the adjacent Cemetery in a point that offers a wonderful view of the Monte Grappa.

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² Renzo De Felice & Emilio Mariano. 1971 (eds.). *Carteggio d'Annunzio-Mussolini (1919-1938)*. Milan: Mondadori, p. 151.

The Italian theaters remained closed as a sign of mourning, thousands of people – both in the United States and in Italy – flocked to bid her farewell for the last time. The Italian flag that covered Duse's coffin is still preserved at the Civic Museum of Asolo, where the new "Duse Section" was inaugurated on October 7, 2023.

1. The Monthly Magazine *Columbus*

At the Vittoriale (Clippings Archive), the sumptuous residence where d'Annunzio lived from 1921 until his death (1938), is held an extract from the April 1924 issue of the Italian-American monthly magazine *Columbus*: it is an important testimony that allows us to understand the value of Duse in the context of emigration, and how her earthly departure gave birth to her myth – on a global level – for the future generations.

The magazine *Columbus* was directed by Vincenzo Campora: he was a journalist born in Naples in 1889, graduated in Economics, and used the pseudonym "The Man in the Street". In 1914 he moved to New York: in the following year, he opened the editorial office at 137 Grand Street. The magazine had also an editorial office in Rome, at 220 Via degli Scipioni. The correspondents from Italy were: Arturo Lancellotti (Rome), Nicola Lapegna (Naples), Antonio Favales (Palermo), Alfredo Vinardi (Turin). Among the Italian contributors, there were: Alfredo Baccelli, Benedetto Croce, Lucio d'Ambra, Onorato Fava, Amalia Guglielminetti, Arturo Labriola, Alfonso Miola, Francesco Torraca, Trilussa. The magazine was richly illustrated and had the purpose of improving Italian-American relations, of spreading the knowledge of Dante and the Italian language among Americans, of increasing knowledge of English among Italians, and of encouraging economic exchanges³.

In April 1924, *Columbus* paid homage to Duse's passing, touching the hearts of the fellow emigrants who had mourned her. Here the table of contents, with texts in English and Italian:

Columbus, vol. XXIII, April 1924, n. 3:

- Editorial by Vincenzo Campora, *L'angoscia dell'esule (In memoria di Eleonora Duse)*
- Stark Young, *A Letter to Duse*
- Robert Underwood Johnson, *The Incomparable Duse*
- William Kimberly Palmer, *Eleonora Duse* (poem in English)
- Short article with a photo of the noblewoman Emma Lance de Parenty
- Federico Mennella, *La Divina Eleonora*

Since Duse had died on April 21, 1924, the newspaper had not had much time to include the news in the current issue of the month giving it the right prominence (each number was printed in the current month, in the last days). But *Columbus* had found itself at an advantage because – explains Vincenzo Campora in the editorial – it had already put together a dossier with the intention of dedicating it to her, in order to celebrate the end of her American tour and her triumphant return to her homeland. In the collective imagination, Duse was clearly seen as the Great Italian among Italians overseas:⁴ "We had decided to dedicate this issue to her as a farewell tribute from America, where she had returned once again in triumph. We wanted to convey to her in a tangible way the gratitude of her emigrant brothers, who had drawn new

³ See Erik Amfitheatrof. 2004. *Sinatra, Scorsese, Di Maggio e tutti gli altri*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza.

⁴ Maria Pia Pagani. 2011. "The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse". *World Literary Review* 1 (1): 84-93.

reason for national pride from her coming among them. [...] This issue, which wanted to be the faithful echo of the exultation of a thousand hearts and the messenger of a greeting of good wishes and gratitude to the illustrious Artist upon her return to her homeland, which awaited her impatiently and gratefully, today, – alas – can only be a faint echo of a whole cry of inextinguishable pain, the cry for the things that are no more, that will never be again”⁵.

Unfortunately, *Columbus* turned the dossier for Duse into a gift *in memoriam*. The mourning of the population was unanimous, but for the Italian-American community it was transformed into an intimate and familiar event, since the artist was considered a supreme ambassador and custodian of Italy⁶. Her death, far from her homeland, touched the sensibilities of the emigrant compatriots to the core and expressed what Vincenzo Campora appropriately defines as *the anguish of the exile*: “And how many tears we see on the parched cheeks of our desolate compatriots, silent in the shiver of the most heartfelt nostalgia. They see, in fact, in the tragedy that concluded the wandering life of this sublime sister, victim of her boundless dream of art, a bit of their own tragedy. Each of them seems to question, in vain, his own destiny, to steal from it the great mystery. «Where, where will death take me? And will I see my homeland again? Oh, I would like to see it again before I die, at least for an hour». It is the last common will of every exile. And the same will, – alas – the chosen one who disappeared murmured in vain, perhaps foreseeing his fate. For this reason, even more than for the new gift brought to us by the art of Eleonora Duse, the Italians of America mourn her premature loss, desperately, and are preparing to pay the most solemn honors to her body, with the most religious devotion”⁷.

2. The Hommage to Duse

The dossier of *Columbus* in April 1924 continues with a text by the theatre critic Stark Young, *A Letter to Duse*⁸, taken from the volume *The Flower in Drama* (1923)⁹. It is an open letter to the great actress that he had written when arrived the news of her tour in the United States. The choice to include this writing fulfills a request from the editorial staff of the magazine, that unfortunately had remained unanswered: “And so that the homage might seem less unworthy, we had humbly written to her: «Accept, illustrious Lady, this our fervent prayer; help us to make less imperfect our homage to the sublime Artist whom the world calls Divine» – and we asked her to indicate the passage of American criticism that had been dearest to her. That passage for us was to be the trophy of her recent battle, which we would have liked to have the honor of jealously guarding in our pages evocative of her American triumph. They knew, it is true, that she detested «biographies, autobiographies, commemorations, honors, jubilees, centenaries, and so on»¹⁰ – these are her words – but nevertheless we did not despair of a response: our hope came from the sincerity of the homage, which she could not but have welcomed benevolently. But the letter received no response: it will never have one. The heroine disappeared in her battle, her most beautiful battle”¹¹.

⁵ Vincenzo Campora. 1924. “L’angoscia dell’esule (In memoria di Eleonora Duse)”. *Columbus* 13 (3): 7.

⁶ Alfredo Bosi. 1921. *Cinquant’anni di vita italiana in America*. New York: Bagnasco Press, pp. 183-186.

⁷ Vincenzo Campora. 1924. “L’angoscia dell’esule (In memoria di Eleonora Duse)”. *Columbus* 13 (3): 7.

⁸ Stark Young. 1924. “A Letter to Duse”. *Columbus* 13 (3): 8-9.

⁹ Stark Young. 1923. *The Flower in Drama: a Book of Papers on the Theatre*. New York: C. Scribner’s Sons.

¹⁰ Maria Pia Pagani. 2020. “Aneddoti e memorie su Eleonora Duse”. *Studi Medievali e Moderni* 24 (1): 353-362.

¹¹ Vincenzo Campora. 1924. “L’angoscia dell’esule (In memoria di Eleonora Duse)”. *Columbus* 13 (3): 7.

There is also a text by the diplomat and writer Robert Underwood Johnson, *The Incomparable Duse*,¹² taken from his autobiographical memoir *Remembered Yesterday* (1923)¹³. Ambassador of the United States to Italy from April 22, 1920, to May 20, 1921, he had already heard first-hand the clamor for Duse's return to the stage, which took place on 5 May 1921 at the Teatro Balbo in Turin. In love with Italy, he had also visited Asolo during his travels. The choice to host this contribution fully reaffirms the aims of the magazine *Columbus*, in creating a cultural and linguistic bridge between Italy and the United States, as does the encomiastic poem *Eleonora Duse* by the intellectual William Kimberly Palmer (1856-1938), in English¹⁴.

Also significant is the anonymous article with the photo of Emma Lance de Parenty, an noble admirer¹⁵ who, on behalf of Italian women in America, had brought flowers to Duse's body: "The lady, who was one of the most authoritative and sincere admirers of the art of Eleonora Duse, will scatter with both hands the most beautiful flowers of America on the mourned body of the Great Departed, thus interpreting the feelings of the most devoted and faithful friends of Italy. Gratefully, we point out to the admiration of our compatriots the kind thought of our Friend, whom our readers have already had occasion to appreciate for the work of constant and fervent Italianity that she accomplished among the Americans"¹⁶.

3. Conclusions

The dossier of *Columbus* ends with a text by the writer Federico Mennella, *La Divina Eleonora*, which offers an interesting generational overview of the reception of Duse's art in the United States. Although now distant, the memory of the great actress's last visit dated back to the 1902/03 tour; at that time her repertoire was mainly with d'Annunzio's plays (*Francesca da Rimini*, *The Dead City*, *La Gioconda*), but also included Alexandre Dumas Jr. (*Claude's Wife*) and Hermann Sudermann (*Magda*). In the 1923/24 tour, her repertoire included Tommaso Gallarati Scotti (*Thy Will Done*), d'Annunzio (*The Dead City*), Henrik Ibsen (*The Lady from the Sea*¹⁷ and *Ghosts*), Marco Praga (*The Closed Door*)¹⁸.

From the Atlantic to the Pacific, in every city where she appeared, the echo of her successes announced and preceded her with the speed of lightning. The welcomes were festive, unanimous, enthusiastic. They fought over her everywhere. And how many were disillusioned at not being able to buy a seat in the theater, perhaps to watch the show standing. Whatever the work, drama or comedy, whatever the author, Ibsen or Praga, d'Annunzio or Gallarati Scotti, the crush of prospective ticket buyers was constantly overwhelming, impossible to satisfy. It was the Duse that people wanted to hear, the Duse that they wanted to see, Duse, only Duse. And to think that little was known about her here. Few, we dare say, had heard of her. Few remembered her in

¹² Robert Underwood Johnson. 1924. "The Incomparable Duse". *Columbus* 13 (3): 10-12.

¹³ Robert Underwood Johnson. 1923. *Remembered Yesterday*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

¹⁴ William Kimberly Palmer. 1924. "Eleonora Duse". *Columbus* 13 (3): 12.

¹⁵ See Maria Pia Pagani. 2022. *Ammiratrici di Eleonora Duse*. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina.

¹⁶ Anonymous. 1924. "Mrs. Emma Lance de Parenty". *Columbus* 13 (3): 12.

¹⁷ Maria Pia Pagani. 2016. "The Lady from the Sea: the ultimate challenge of Eleonora Duse". *Images. Imagini. Images. Journal of Image and Cultural Studies* 6: 83-98.

¹⁸ See Maria Ida Biggi. 2010 (ed.). *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*. Milan: Skira, pp. 107-108 and p. 111.

the fervor of her youth, when she made her first appearance in the United States. Her name had remained¹⁹.

Thanks to the extract of the magazine *Columbus* that had arrived at the Vittoriale, d'Annunzio felt vividly that pain that only those who have a distant love can know. But he also felt that patriotic pride that, in dark moments, transforms into faith and supports a fighter.

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