

Russian Critics On Eleonora Duse

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Our feelings for Duse
can only be defined as love.
Yuri Beliaev

Eleonora Duse came on tour in Russia four times: in the spring of 1891, when she was not a world known actress yet, then in the winters of 1891, 1896, and 1907-1908.

She performed in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, Kiev, and Kharkov. She played the parts that were well known and popular in Russia. In 1891 Russian spectators liked best Margarita Gotie (*The Lady of the Camellias* by Dumas-fils), Fru-fru (*Fru-fru* by Meliac and Galevi), The Mistress of the Inn (*The Mistress of the Inn* by Goldoni) and with very popular Nora (*A Doll's House* by Ibsen). In 1896 Duse added Magda (*Homeland* by Zudermann), and in 1908 – Hedda Habler (*Hedda Habler* by Ibsen) and Rebecca (*Rosmersholm* by Ibsen) and two heroines of the symbolist drama Monna Vanna (*Monna Vanna* by Maeterlinck) and Sylvia (*Gioconda* by D'Annunzio).

In the time span of 17 years Russian audiences saw Duse four times. Three times from 1891 till 1896 and one more time – 12 years later. For 17 years the overwhelming majority of critics admired the actress, the appreciation for Duse's acting didn't change, but became deeper and deeper. This was obviously connected with the change of art movement from naturalism to symbolism, which, on the one hand, determined the changes of Duse's repertoire and the manner of acting, and, on the other hand, influenced the spirits and tastes of Russian audiences and contributed to the coining of the

new art terms.

The most discerning critics, including Kugel, Belyaev, Volkonsky, Efros, and Suvorin, and the well-known writers A. Chekhov, M. Kuzmin, etc. devoted articles to Duse, and the best directors, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Nemirovich-Danchenko, expressed their views on her acting.

Chekhov saw Duse in 1891. He wrote:

A remarkable actress. I had never seen anything like her before. I watched this Duse, and I was seized by melancholy at the thought that we must cultivate our tastes and feelings on such wooden actresses as Yermolova and her like, whom we call great because we haven't seen better. Looking at Duse, I understand why the Russian theatre is so boring¹.

Meyerhold saw Duse in 1908. He wrote shortly: «I saw Duse. Very taken»².

In the articles of the brilliant critic Yuri Beliaev the image of Duse is used as the description language for the actors. In the articles devoted to Strepetova, Komissarzhevskaya, Yavorskaya, Zankovetskaya, Sarah Bernhardt, Rejane, Sada Yacco, Tina di Lorenzo and Sandro Moissi Belyaev refers to Duse.

In writing about the great Italian actress, critics brought up issues that were under discussion for the whole of the 19th century.

Duse and the question of the actor

Critics tried to explain the phenomenon of Duse with the help of two Russian conventional conceptions of acting: «emotional experience», meaning temperament, inspiration, passion, and «presentation», meaning technical skill, self-control, intellectuality. This antithesis is one of the most significant for theatre writing for the entire 19th century. All those who wrote on theatre in 19th century Russia addressed this opposition and expressed their attitude toward it. It descends from the comparison between Russian tragic actress Ekaterina Semionova and French guest actress M-lle George

that took place in 1809. Russian audience evaluated George as emotionless and greatly concerned with acting techniques. So for the whole 19th century the idea prevailed that to be a French actor (especially an actress) is to be cold, elegant and to have perfect outward appearance. To the contrary, Italian actors appeared to be akin to Russians. They seemed to be much closer to Mochalov, not to Karatyguin, to Semionova, not to George. In the acting of Tommaso Salvini, Ernesto Rossi, Adelaide Ristori, Virginia Zucchi, Giovanni de Grasso, Lina Cavalieri Russian audiences and critics saw realism and warmth. In Russia Duse was considered a kindred soul from the very beginning of her first tour. In March 1891 Suvorin noted that her realism and cordiality bring Russian audiences closer to Italian actress³. Some years later Kugel would state about Duse's style: «We ourselves are this style. This style is our present, our busy, tired, torn, restless age»⁴.

Only by 1908, the necessary words would be found to explain why we do understand Duse better than «German, French and even Italian spectators» (Belyaev)⁵. Though the idea that Duse reveals herself through the images of the poet was common, critics drew attention to the actress's personality only in 1908, writing about her third visit. Now not the heroine's, but Duse's graceful image appears in the texts. She is spoken about not as an actress, but as a woman. Now critics stress her personal tragedies. Mykheev writes: «[...] a fragile woman, suffering the full depth of the personal tragedy of marriage to a criminal, in love with the hugely capricious D'Annunzio [...] And we must be grateful to fate that this bitter personal lot fell to such a creative genius to the great delight and edification of us all»⁶. Gornfeld develops the idea: «An actor who doesn't reveal himself may surprise with his skill, but does not make an impression. The spectator wants to feel what's going on behind the mask of stage make-up – otherwise, he feels himself aesthetically unsatisfied». This critic called Duse: «[...] not only a great tragic actress but a great tragic character»⁷. And Volkonsky stated that the person's predominance over a role was the essence of her power⁸. So Russian critics unanimously asserted that to understand something not about the hero, but about the actor himself was much more important for the spectator.

On the other hand, it turned out that the personal unhappy fate is crucial for an actress's creative work. For Russian criticism 1880-1890, an actress's personal life is a component of both the image of the actress and the characters of her heroines. Speaking about Strepetova, Ermolova and even Savina, critics state that the personal sufferings serve as a basis for tragic acting. According to Belyaev, Komissarzhevskaya is one of the actresses who go onto the stage not to life, but – from life. Such people come to the stage with experience of life, they have suffered, and only their acting is «genuine truth»⁹.

Critics compare Duse with the very influential Russian actors Mochalov and Strepetova, who were considered «great teachers to a whole generation» and with the most famous writers. The Italian actress seems the combination of genuine simplicity and beauty of Pushkin and heartfelt nerviness of Dostoevsky» (Mikheev)¹⁰.

Speaking about Duse, Belyaev argues that it was Russian literature that taught us to understand the suffering and passionate soul of an artist. The critic states that like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Duse has an elevated and quietly wise realism combined with 'confession' and 'prophecy', therefore she can justly be called «the muse of the Russian novel»¹¹.

Duse and Naturalism

Duse's acting was studied in the context of the main styles of the period: naturalism, realism, and symbolism. Between 1891-96 realism and naturalism were the main theater topics discussed. But from the very first articles Russian critics stressed the unusual, for Russian actresses, combination of "nature" and "technical skills". The Italian actress was called a «daring but graceful» naturalist, who plays «naturally, but artistically». Suvorin wrote that it was impossible to forget for a minute «[...] that before us is an *artist*, "a creature marked by God's finger", and an *actress*, superlatively knowing all secrets of stage practice, with an entirely correct awareness of the complete necessity of applying these secrets to her work»¹².

All critics agree that the actress deviated from the heroines of the plays. They especially stress her ability to create a deep, psychologically complex image, even if it is based on primitive dramatic materials: «She creates the soul where the author gave only effects» (Ivanov)¹³. Everyone writes, that Duse plays not the French Camelia, or the tsarina of Egypt, or the wife of the Norwegian lawyer. But Duse, as always, plays a person. Some critics stress that the actress creates an individual character every time (Dymov, Noskov)¹⁴, others consider her heroines to be the variations on the *Eternal Womanhood* theme (Ivanov)¹⁵.

Duse and Symbolism.

Until 1896 critics spoke about pessimism and neurasthenia. «A graceful tenderness», «nervousness», «suffering», «pessimistic tone» were the requisite words in the writings about Duse. In 1896 they start to speak about beauty and ideal. And in 1908 the new symbolist topic emerges – the deep and sorrowful grief.

Basilevsky states: «Her heroines are almost always devoid of a wholesome undiluted joy of life, in them one could always hear, even through laughter, an inner bitterness, a heartfelt sorrow»¹⁶. Yazykov writes that Duse had acquired «the face of a martyr». But her sorrow is not only tragic, it is also beautiful. «Unearthly beauty [...] Every gesture is just asking to be painted. One regrets that there is no cinematographer to immortalize these supple sculptural movements, this divine beauty of line [...] Magnificent and mournful figure, personifying world anguish»¹⁷.

This time nobody calls her a realistic actress, now Duse is interpreted as a symbolic actress or as the symbol itself. By 1908 thanks to Symbolism, critics finally find the necessary words to describe the Italian Divine.

«Duse presented a symbol, a true symbol; she revealed an extract from Sylvia» (L'vov about her role in D'Annunzio's *La Gioconda*)¹⁸.

«Hedda is a world of sorrow, the eternal feminine, the beauty of suffering, the madness of beauty [...]» (Razumovsky)¹⁹.

Yuri Belyaev described and defined the symbol “Duse”. He begins his article with the epigraph: «beauty is grief» and states that Duse has the gaze of Michaelangelo's *Night*. «[...] a sensitive soul, woven from the finest fibers of feeling, responsive to the slightest breath from without, like Aeolus's harp, the face of a genuine's mater dolorosa, whose the dark-complexioned pallor seems chiseled from ivory; sadly dreamy eyes, like the quiet waters of a Venetian lagoon, a wearily stumbling gait like that of a person carrying a cross of suffering – that is Duse»²⁰.

It even seemed that the very fact of her existence could solve the most important problems of the era. How will the theater develop? Will it be Scriabin's grandiose religious synthesis, the theatre of Dionysus, Meyerhold's or Stanislavsky's? All these discussions became pointless. Russian critics saw Duse's powerful talent as

the fusion of realism and symbolism, of theatre tradition and innovation. So Duse seemed to be the answer to the questions. She symbolized the rebirth of the theater.

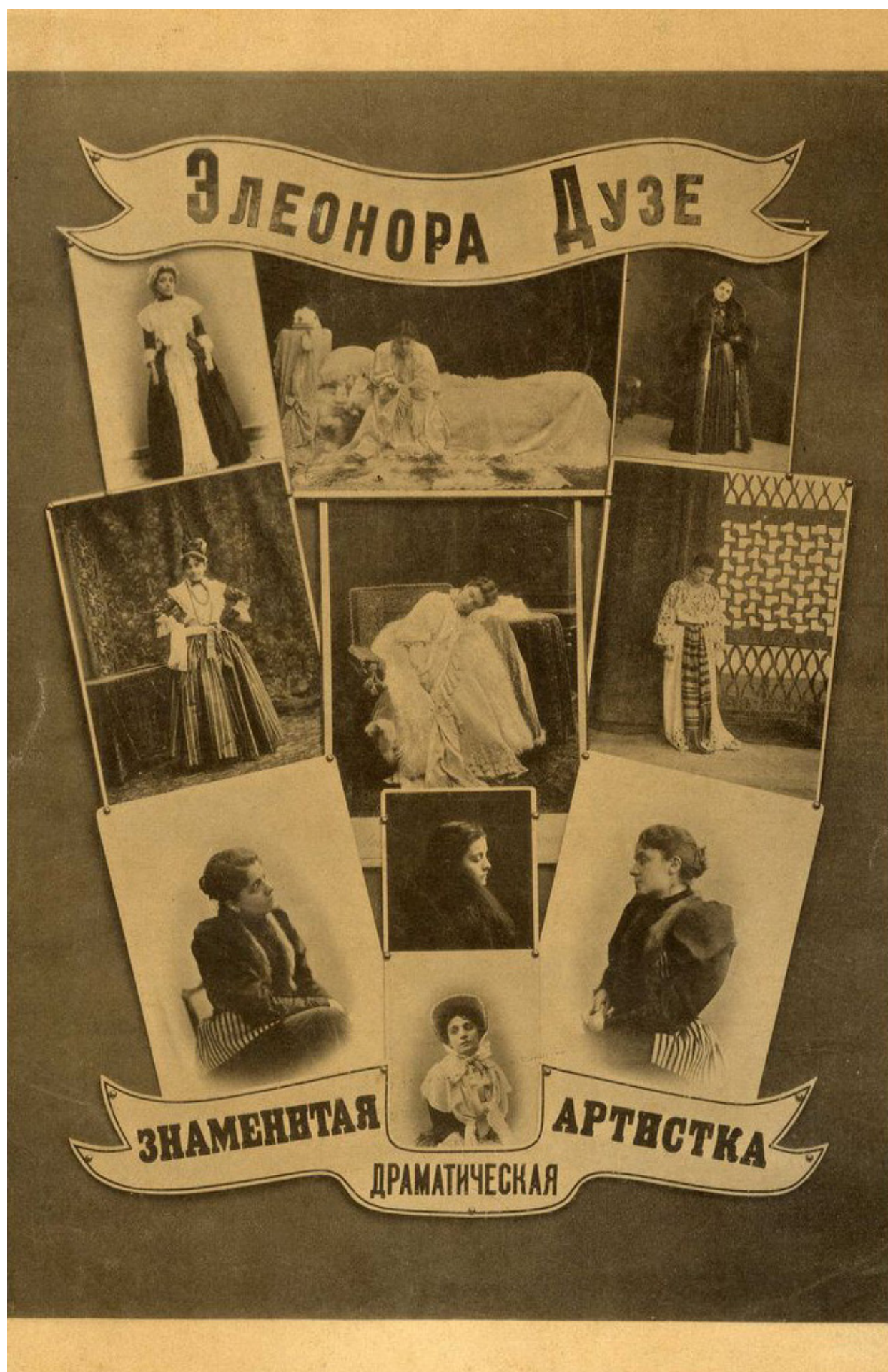
«Now a great radiant star burns above us. It symbolizes rebirth. We see its light in the west and are happy to worship it»²¹, wrote Beliaev.

The great Italian actress captivated her Russian contemporaries at once and they took her as their own. The combination of naturalism and art, of realism and prophetic power, that Duse demonstrated, was unprecedented for Russian theatre. The symbolist critics took Duse as the “original of actress” which meant – the ideal actress.

And 100 years later in the article, devoted to the 150th anniversary of the actress's birth a contemporary critic would call her the symbol of the art itself²².

Notes

- 1 А.Чехов, *Письмо М.П. Чеховой*, 17 марта 1891 в кн.: А. Чехов. *Полное собрание сочинений в 30-ти тт. Письма в 12 т.*: Т.4, Наука, Москва 1976, с. 198. (hereinafter quotes translated by M. Meisel).
- 2 В. Мейерхольд, *Переписка: 1896-1939*, Искусство, Москва 1976, с. 111.
- 3 Ср.: А. Суворин, *Госпожа Дузе*, в кн.: Элеонора Дузе. *Отзывы печати о гастрольях Дузе в С.-Петербурге, в Малом театре, март-апрель 1891*, Санкт Петербург 1891, с. 8.
- 4 А. Кутель, *Элеонора Дузе*, в кн.: А. Кутель, *Театральные портреты*, Искусство, Ленинград 1967, с. 306-307.
- 5 Ю. Беляев, *Дузе*, в кн.: Ю. Беляев, *Статьи о театре*, Гиперион, Санкт Петербург 2003, с. 281.
- 6 В. Михеев, *Элеонора Дузе*, «Русский артист», № 3, 1908, с. 44.
- 7 А. Горнфельд, *Дузе, Вагнер, Станиславский* в кн. *Театр: Книга о новом театре: Сборник статей*, Шиповник, Санкт Петербург 1908, с. 77, 73.
- 8 Ср. С. Волконский, *Дузе*, «Экран и сцена», 1991, 1 авг., с. 8-9.
- 9 Ср. Ю. Беляев, «Родина», в: Ю. Беляев, *Статьи о театре*, цит., с. 187.
- 10 В. Михеев, *Элеонора Дузе*, цит., с. 44.
- 11 Ю. Беляев, *Дузе*, в: Ю. Беляев, *Статьи о театре*, цит., с. 281.
- 12 А. Суворин, *Госпожа Дузе*, цит., с. 11.
- 13 Ив. Иванов, *Элеонора Дузе (Фернанда Сарду, Адриенна Лекуверер Скриба и Легувэз, Нора Ибсена)*, «Артист», № 19, 1892, с. 139.
- 14 Ср.: О. Дымов, Носков, Смоленский, *Письма о театре*, «Новости и биржевая газета», 1891, 20 декабря, с. 23.
- 15 Ср.: Ив. Иванов, *Элеонора Дузе*, «Артист», №18, 1891, с. 129.
- 16 В. Базилевский, *Гастроли Э. Дузе*, «Русский артист», №3, 1908, с. 43.
- 17 Яз. Дим. [Языков Д.Д.], *Гастроли Э. Дузе*, «Русский артист», №5, 1908, с. 70-71.
- 18 Як. Львов, *Гастроли Э. Дузе*, «Русский артист», № 5, 1908, с. 71.
- 19 С. Разумовский, *Безумие красоты*, «Русский артист», № 5, 1908, с. 99-100.
- 20 Ю. Беляев, *Дузе*, в: Ю. Беляев, *Статьи о театре*, цит., с. 281.
- 21 Там же, с. 282.
- 22 Ср.: А. Гусев, *Искусство, скрывающее жизнь*, «Империя драмы», №22, 2009. Январь.





Ritratto fotografico di Eleonora Duse in La locandiera di C. Goldoni, 1890. Centro Studi Teatro e Melodramma, Fondazione Giorgio Cini.