## I.A. DUSE

SUSAN BATSON in conversation with DANIEL DE LA FALAISE

Working from the age of four on the provincial stages of northern Italy, Eleonora Duse soon became revered as a prodigiously talented naturalistic actress going on to revolutionise the very nature of performance. In direct contrast to her contemporary dramatic rival, Sarah Bernhardt, La Duse instead practiced an "elimination of the self", a precursor of what Lee Strasberg would later teach as "method acting". Eventually assuming the roles of producer and director, La Duse's company toured Europe and the Americas, working closely with the plays of Henrik Ibsen and Gabriele d'Annunzio. Following a triumphant American tour she was the first woman and Italian to grace the cover of Time magazine in 1923, and the First Lady, Mrs Cleveland, shocked Washington society by hosting the first ever White House tea for an actress, in her honour. A complex character, she seemed almost to harness the innate sadness that followed her through life, channelling the emotion into her work, as she battled for liberation, both from herself, and from the confines of a conservative society. Susan Batson is one of the world's most respected acting coaches, and life member of the Actors Studio, mentoring the likes of Philip Seymour Hoffman, Nicole Kidman, Jamie Foxx and Juliette Binoche. She here talks to her former acting pupil Daniel de la Falaise about the life and legend of the enigmatic Eleonora Duse.





at the end of The dead city, tragedy by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) Italy, 19th-20th century. © DeAgostini/Getty Images

usan Batson: The thing about Eleonora Duse for me is what she called "la grazia", a state of grace. The first time she experienced this state of grace was on stage while playing Juliet at the forum in Verona aged 14. And this divine intervention, as she called it, was very important to her; she found her entry point, she found a way to make art that was both beyond and above her. The inspiration came from something deep and divine within her and is what I think made her unusual years ago as she is still unusual today. Today people are not working the way that she worked; Daniel Day-Lewis, maybe he makes an attempt. It is also worth remembering the great force of spirit and will that La Duse projected; that enabled her to act as her own producer and director, run her own theatre company which travelled across

Europe, Scandinavia and both North and South America. Daniel de la Falaise: Since having been introduced to Eleonora by you when I was a kid in New York, I have always found her quite fascinating. Reflecting upon her life exposes so very many layers of struggle and garners much admiration, not least for her capacity to channel her own inner truth into the work in such a way as to hit a universal tone, "the elimination of self", as she called it. Through endowing her craft with the trials and tribulations of her life, her joys, her sorrow, her dreams and pain, she was able to transcend the guise of the characters she inhabited, and to commune with and vitalise an audience. It makes one think about the outsider as an artistic entity, and what being a woman and an actor in 1880s Italian society must have been like. And the sorrow of what one must give up and relinquish in pursuit of art; of sorrow as the food for artistic expression, the first the fuel – in a sense – of knowledge that enables the depth of experience that gives for a deeper performance. Just now on my way to meet you I was reading about the state of about precisely what you just referenced, "la grazie". Fourteen-year-old Eleonora walking the walking the market square of Verona buying flowers, just as her actor father had done for the square of Verona buying flowers. It ralls the story of Angelica done for her actress mother, Angelica, years before. It tells the story of Angelica having noticed this dashing young man walking the same way each day. He Passed under her balcony. As he passed she dropped rose petals in his path. One day he look day he looked up! And so a love story was born. But by the time Eleonora was 14 and playing the story was born. But by the time Eleonora was 14 and playing the story was born. and playing Juliet back in Verona, her mother Angelica was ill and life was hard indeed. Action indeed. Acting and travelling with a theatre company, sleeping in a different bed every night. every night, not necessarily knowing where the next meal came from, counting out pennion out pennies for not very good food in return; all such enormous pressure for a small child. Lyopada, all discounts on the stage perhaps become a freedom, a small child. I wonder, did the space on the stage perhaps become a freedom, a

home, a liberator, a refuge, a place of comfort as she would call it?

Susan: I don't know if she ever really got comfort. Maybe acting, maybe with her men, but I don't know if she ever deeply got comfort. I was reading about her death and in her death she sat up and ordered people around, she was busy even in death and she moved and moved and moved, she was busy, busy and I have a feeling that the work gave her refuge, and I don't know if it gave her peace but it gave her a place to go that was private and gratifying.

Daniel: The paradox of the only place to be private, being in front of them all. Do you think there runs a pattern amongst artists and performers, of a certain ruthlessness or selfishness in order to perfect their craft? I don't mean it in a derogatory way. I was thinking about that because already before her mother died, Eleonora was the attraction of the theatre group, so she was aware as a prepubescent girl that she was the one putting bread on the table, feeding the hungry mouths - they all depended upon her. Then she lost her mother, found herself alone and through hard work over the years gained success, acclaim, financial autonomy and independence. Then at 23 she married this guy at which point everything was surrendered. The confines of society at that time determined that a girl's freedom was revoked the moment she married. His name was Tebaldo Checchi and she left Italy with him on tour.

Susan: When she went to South America, I thought it was interesting that she said that she and Tebaldo had an intimate relationship, but the minute she got out of Italy and landed into another world, she betrayed him and had a huge affair with another man.

Daniel: Clever girl! It was her taking her power back, to cuckold the husband with the leading man and take back her position of autonomy, to humiliate him into relinquishing his stake to control her.

Susan: I know that when she left Italy she felt a sense of freedom. The extreme lengths one will go to, just because of gender, just to have the most basic autonomy of self. It was so painful, the sadness you see, immediately, you look at her and you are sad, sadness in her face, in her eyes. I'm trying to think if I would call it only sorrow, or sorrow and liberation; it's a battle, a constant battle for

Daniel: If you think about child stars, kids that have great success and recognition during their formative years maybe an unflinching will to express themselves becomes their reference to behaviour?

Susan: Britney Spears, Michael Jackson. Michael's defiance was something else.



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"If the sight of the blue

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your soul is alive...'

ELEONORA DUSE

With it he created his own world, there is something in that.

Daniel: Being on such a strong path, being depended upon as a young soul at a formative time. Also by which comes a very wide window for disappointment in the people around you, to see how supposedly grown-up people behave. How

greed and envy invariably corrupt. Susan: The horror that people don't know her and don't know of her is huge to me. People in the industry don't know about her, I have to tell everyone about her, which I find disconcerting. They don't know that she's the first naturalistic actress. They're not teaching it in schools. Sarah Bernhardt will be referenced,

and yet Eleonora often not. Daniel: Do people think about theatre any longer? Eleonora's stage work inspired the founders of the Moscow Arts Theatre, the Group Theatre and later the Actors Studio. Just as directly innovative as it was for the theatre of the first half of the 20th century, to what degree would you say it was also enriching to film

actors. Is there a blood line? Susan: When you go to the MoMA and you see her films, you're laughing, you're really laughing. It must have been in 1969, when I was doing the musical Hair on Broadway, when Lee Strasberg exposed me to this phenomenon. When you saw Sarah Bernhardt and Duse, Bernhardt gesticulating wildly and then you saw this really natural acting - it was Duse. Everyone else around her would be acting acting - acting, and she would just maintain the truth, it was amazing to watch

how truthful she was. So in my opinion, she strongly influenced film. Kim Stanley, the American theatre actress, was very inspired by La Duse. She was in a film called The Goddess. She, like Duse, acted from truth - deep, connected truth. You instantly felt that the film was deeper than the frame; so many different things were

Daniel: Did Eleonora inspire playwrights of her time? Susan: Certainly. Ibsen, Chekhov, Gabriele d'Annunzio. Really and truly she inspired them. Daniel: To have a poet write words for her. Words of "beauty and the flame of life", as she would call it: was it not this dream that embroiled her in such a lengthy and draining love affair with Gabriele d'Annunzio? How did Eleonora first come to your attention?

Susan: I heard of Duse through Herbert Berghof at the Actors Studio when he was substituting for Lee Strasberg. Someone gave me a note in class asking if I knew that he was comparing me to Duse! I remember thinking, how do I pronounce this? Dusa, Duse? So I was very inspired by Herbert because he was so much about responsibility to humanity. His wife Uta Hagen was about the technique of acting, and Herbert was about art and the importance of art in society.

Daniel: Are Herbert and Uta people that would've seen the Moscow Art Theatre on stage? Perhaps even Eleonora on Broadway in the 1920s on her

Susan: I know Uta Hagen did, I'm not sure Herbert did. He may have seen her in Austria

before he came to this country. Uta was very close to Eva Le Gallienne who wrote a biography on Duse titled The Mystic in the Theatre. Strasberg, Kazan, Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, all of that group were right on the cusp there, of having in some way seen a moment of her just before her death.

Daniel: And Strasberg also studied with Stanislavski?

Susan: He had been exposed to the Moscow Art Theatre. Stella Adler claims that he had been exposed to the "disciples" of the Moscow Art Theatre. Whereas she and the master had had "eye-to-eye contact" and therefore were in the room together and doing the work together!

Daniel: So, if Eleonora was the first great modern actress which led to the exploring of a method, or a system for training a whole new generation, when did "the method" begin to garner a bad name? Because in a sense it has!

Susan: Duse always had a bad name, in her own time, amongst her peers. Everyone thought, "What is this no make-up nonsense?", so during her career she always had detractors. Her genius finally overwhelmed the voices of the detractors, but all through the career she had a bad name. This came to a head when George Bernard Shaw discovered her.

Daniel: Ah, this was during that time in London when both Bernhardt and Eleonora were playing the same repertoire of plays, head to head and George Bernard Shaw wrote his famous review favouring Eleonora... "The best modern acting I have ever seen", declaring that "with a tremor of the lip, which you feel rather than see, and which lasts half an instant, La Duse touches you straight on

role immeasurably dwarfs the poor little octave and a half on which Sarah Bernhardt plays such pretty canzonets and stirring marches," La Duse? What are you talking about? This is greatness! He was astounded that people said that audience never knew when Duse walked off the stage and you never realised she had walked on it, she was just there. All of a sudden, she was there and you just felt something, she never made an entrance like Bernhardt. The dramatic actress she was, Bernhardt made the grandest entrances of all. Bernard Shaw recognised Sarah as beautiful, "but", he asked, "does she touch, does she have the ability to really touch?" It's really amazing and it touches me personally

Daniel: I remember reading about when Bernhardt came to Bologna and a very young Eleonora religiously went to watch her every night, and was in awe of her. You know, sometimes things are so huge, you understand them well and what you understand is not how to emulate them but how to harness the same energy in a different way - in your own way.

Susan: I remember the first time I met Nicole Kidman and she said that Meryl Streep was her idol and wanted to emulate her. I think that Meryl corners the market on great acting but although she has a genius imagination and is a genius technician, it is a very different way of acting from what I like to teach. Meryl is like Bernhardt in the sense that she can evoke any feeling, any emotion but might not be truly connected to the role and just leaves that tiny fragment out of a connection to a character.

Daniel: What, like a master carpenter making beautiful ornate furniture, as opposed to working with geometry and golden proportion?

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Susan: Yes; Juliette [Binoche] has contributed highly to the business. And hers is a body of work that you hope that Duse would approve of. It's interesting though, like an early de Niro she strives for what's beyond the artifice, what the truth is in the human being and how to portray that, and therefore in a way, contributing more to acting as a profession

Daniel: So you would say the work is what? Aspiring for a place of the walking and talking, dreaming breathing...?

Susan: As an actor or actress, you are responsible for the walking and talking human being, and required to build it. If you don't, you are not a mirror of society. If you looked at Bernhardt, you never saw this mirror but if you look at Duse this is what you saw, and only what you saw. And that's the huge difference, if we don't see this mirror, I am afraid that acting will remain some sort of secondary art form and people will not fully understand it or respect it.

Daniel: So here we are back at drawing from experience and the depths of the human psyche, and the fact that sorrow is such an engine for knowledge, most importantly for an actor, selfknowledge. And that is so important to be able to take that step further and really create the living, breathing, feeling human being that you inhabit as the actor or actress.

Susan: Exactly. That's the universal connection where everyone feels as implicated and as involved, as thrilled, where people succeed in channelling through them a current, a life force.

Daniel: Where you never feel like an observer but part of the stage. Eleonora was exactly that, a life force on stage, and that was so revelatory for the time as the norm was all about presentation and not - representation. Susan: She was phenomenal.

Daniel: Do you think that part of her greatness was that she was a powerful woman and that she brought great emancipated sensuality to her roles? If you think of a presentational romantic scene on stage, you are going to have to have an indicative flirtation, whereas Eleonora was this unmade-up living breathing woman that would live in her role completely.

Susan: One would hope that it never turned vulgar but the difference between her and Bernhardt was that Duse would find a way to feel exactly like the character within her. Her emotion really came from an internal force within her. where she was in love with this man in this play and she would find a way to feel this in the deepest way. She was very academic about it in one way, she studied very hard, wrote extensive notes on everything but you would never have guessed, as she was such a natural on stage. Her craft of the art was that she had a real appreciation for the truth and the literature. But really, the truth; I think it is important in this powerful emotional presence that there was this very heavy duty intellectual who really deconstructed herself and then built herself up for the very near.

Susan: "With insight and subtlety, spiritual and moral sense, La Duse in every

Daniel: When reading one of her books I picked up this sweet quotation: "If the

sight of blue skies fills you with joy, if a blade of grass springing up in the fields has the power to move you, if the simple things of nature have a message that you has the pour understand, rejoice for your soul is alive to help, and to continually help and share. That's the sum of all knowledge; it's the meaning of art." I also found this, and this is from the early days training with you in New York: "To create through one's craft a conscious structure for the spontaneous opening up of the subconscious." Which deals with the intellectual side of it, you need to know it, you need to research it, quantify it, and visualise it three-dimensionally, to then be

Susan: And Duse was really able to do that. It's like Marlon Brando, even Brando was in the pursuit of something. He understood what the art form gave the world and he was very political about that. He was never satisfied, he even made jokes about acting, but he knew he could give the world something, he could contribute somehow, and that was very important to him. You know, in the beginning he was with Stella Adler and then he became part of the Actors Studio

Daniel: Really? So he started with Stella and was Stella then involved in the

Susan: So Stella was married to Harold Clurman, who was involved with the studio, and they were fighting and fighting and then they divorced because she hated Strasberg so much and everything that the Studio represented. But what's interesting with Eleonora is the public persona she cultivated.

Daniel: Right, she wove a public persona or spun one from very early on. She never gave any interviews and yet there was so much stuff about her out there. Do you think that she aspired to anything that the commercial side of acting could have brought her?

Susan: I'm pretty sure she wanted to be famous. Daniel: How come? You mean her motivation was for security. Driven by a fear from growing up and not really knowing where the next meal would come from, so she dreamt of being an internationally acclaimed artist. Which would mean status that transcended gender and enabled autonomy as a woman, status that transcended class, nationality etc?

Susan: Yes, since she wasn't very commercial she needed it. I think it was poverty-inspired, because she knew of that life, she knew of that lifestyle. I keep thinking, with her, did it all come from the sorrow, the deaths, the pain, the loss of her mother so early? Did it all come from that or did it all come from great intellect and her working it out herself, was she a genius? It's a quite an exhilarating question. I mean, she decided that she was going to learn French and so she learned French. It was a decision she made and then went and did it. I want to know more and I want to get into this more, what were the thoughts she had in her mind?

Daniel: Was it intellect, intuition or experience that got her to access this channel of vitality that

she was able to share on a universal level? Energising and enlightening her audience? Susan: The closest person that I feel can do this now and that I always fight for

Daniel: Yes, it's rather remarkable Juliette's aura, you pick it up from afar. Susan: In my opinion there is no evident bloodline after Eleonora, there are just too few of us who talk about her and too few of us who care about the work. There is something to establishing a history of theatre that actually talks about La Duse as a leading personality and the people that follow in her footsteps. People talk about Bernhardt before talking about her, and this is something that I am

Daniel: Do you think that in a Russian tradition it would be the other way really amazed about. Not necessarily in a good way. around? Eleonora heralded and Bernhardt a footnote? The Moscow Art Theatre gave birth to a whole generation who went on to inspire your generation, which became this transitory moment in stagecraft. It is very different from the tradition

Susan: Maybe it is because it wasn't totally international in the same way. Chekhov saw Eleonora and saw something absolutely phenomenal and told everyone to go and see her when she was in Russia. Then in Strasberg's generation, they got a taste of the beginning of it, people were very excited and interested in naturalism and acting not being too theatrical. The next generation then went Out into the world, changing the face of theatre and movies, and really changing it. The Property of the Prope it. They are the great grandchildren! Then there's Brando, Steve McQueen, Paul Newmap's Newman's generation where you can still feel her influence. After that came Al

Pacino and Robert de Niro and that's where it stops.

Daniel: What about the girls? That's a lot of boys you mentioned there

Susan: So Meryl doesn't do the work the same way, she just does it. Maybe she's the generation after Al Pacino but yes, they sort of brought her along and got her into the group and there has not really been another actress.

Daniel: And Daniel Day-Lewis is what, the continuation of Eleonora's bloodline? Susan: He is separated from the British way; he was inspired by Pacino and de Niro, like Juliette's generation

Daniel: Is Cate Blanchett a bit like Meryl Streep in the technical?

Susan: Yes. There is some sort of bloodline. I think people admire them, rather than drawing from them and being inspired by them, to make that feeling their own, and creating a new. But it's a big conflict there, a discussion and a balance of what the work is and what the work does. For me, the more immediate generation is not in America. I don't know where exactly, but the industry in America has changed so much that I have a hard time seeing where the work would come from there. The struggle has always been for the art to transcend the onfines of the commercial.

Daniel: For guidance there's you, Susan, who actors are very lucky to have, but then there's this other gang of acting teachers that are very different in their

Susan: Which brings us back to the balance between art and commerce; the only place I have worked that wasn't about commerce was at the Public Theater in

> New York downtown with the New York Shakespeare festival. When they moved the festival to Broadway it ran into trouble but essentially we were doing theatre because it was important and it had something to say.

> Daniel: So if you put the genie in the bottle, distil the essence of her. What was it?

Susan: Well, if you are a four-year-old child and you go on stage and the director tells you what to do and you just do it, everything else is just insignificant, it just melts away, you are just there and you just create this world. No ego, the thing that a lot of people find hindering them as actors, she never had to deal with. She also had a very supportive father which we have forgotten to mention, he taught her how to read and write and to act to the best of his ability; and he was also there for her emotionally. He was financially dependent on her, but offered great support through everyone thinking that she wasn't a great beauty or a perfect body or any of these things. Daniel: And what's her tragic flaw?

Susan: Her tragic flaw was that she really, truly could not be intimate in private as she could be

Daniel: It's been such a gift of being aware of her since an early age as an actor. I am thinking specifically of Il fuoco, Gabriele d'Annunzio's novel, where he uses her in a very cruel way, making her 20 years older. It's a love story to Venice but it is most importantly an extraordinarily beautiful declaration of love to her. She is described as a neurotic, aging, sexually voracious star of the

stage where he, in the wings, is channeling the mob's desire to ravish her. It was his bestseller and it was this image of her that brought her to the awareness of international drawing rooms and added hugely to her notoriety and even though the image was not necessarily accurate, it became part of her public persona. Coming at a time where she was at the height of her powers as an actress crisscrossing oceans and continents on tour to critical acclaim, she was very hurt by her lover d'Annunzio's portrayal of her but she quickly let it go. It was pure genius letting him write this novel, she dreamt of a poet to write for her for the theatre, she was in love with the idea of a poet who would write her the perfect piece of theatre for her stage.

Susan: And that's what one has to use to go forward. Harness that ether, there was a time when the Moscow Art Theatre grabbed it and moved it forward but today we are more holding on to this truth of expression rather than bringing it forward

Daniel: The reassuring part of the craft is when, through the work, one is able to transcend situation and circumstance and touch people. There's humanity to acting that is universal.

Susan: Yes, and that is called "greatness". And for whatever reason we are able to recognise it and go, "Oh, my god! There it is!" Like George Bernard Shaw when he saw it up against all the glamour of Bernhardt, and he knew the difference in a heartbeat. It's universal to the point where anyone anywhere can go, "Aha, that's greatness!

Daniel: Thank you, Susan!