

LA 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.



Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) in her flat in Venice, October, 1894. © DEA/O. SAVIO/De Agostini/Getty Images

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 going on.

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 last tour?

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 the very heart".

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

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 so deeply.

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?

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, self-knowledge. 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 duty intellectual who really deconstructed herself and then built herself up for each role she played.

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

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GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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 understand, rejoice for your soul is alive to help, and to continually help and and this is from the early days training with you in New York: "To create through conscious." 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 able to rip it up, throw it out, let it go – and be."

Susan: And Duse was really able to do that. It's like Marlon Brando, even Brando and he was very political about that. He understood what the art form gave the world 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 through his work with Elia Kazan.

Daniel: Really? So he started with Stella and was Stella then involved in the Actors Studio at all?

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 is Juliette.

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 really amazed about. Not necessarily in a good way.

Daniel: Do you think that in a Russian tradition it would be the other 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 in English theatre.

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. They are the great grandchildren! Then there's Brando, Steve McQueen, Paul 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.

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ELEONORA DUSE

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 confines 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 approach.

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 on stage.

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 criss-crossing 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 or developing it.

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!

Susan: Always in the art!