

Laura Mariani

## Giacinta Pezzana Off Stage

I have chosen two of actress Giacinta Pezzana's letters from the 410 published in my book, *L'attrice del cuore. Storia di Giacinta Pezzana attraverso le lettere* (Le Lettere, Firenze 2005). Those 410 letters, valuable documents of theatre history and history in general, were selected from more than one thousand that the actress wrote between 1876 and 1918. They offer great insight into the modernity and feminist soul of this nineteenth century actress whose claim to fame, until now, has been her performance in the lead role of Zola's *Teresa Raquin* and her artistic relationship with the young Eleonora Duse.

I chose to emphasise the expression "off stage" rather than "private life" in the title of this article because being on stage is a particular kind of public display. The dichotomy between public and private has served as a valuable, malleable and transitive lens both for women's and actresses' history ('public women' *par excellence*, even when women were excluded from that sphere). Letters are a very valuable historical source precisely because they are suspended between expressing subjectivity and providing information, between conveying confessions and codifying communication, between being historical documents and literary texts.

I confront the term theatre in reference to epistolary writing for a very specific reason: there is in fact an affinity between writing letters and performance. Something of Pezzana's art can be gleaned through her letters. Their material characteristics, such as paper and format, handwriting, underlining and erasures provide clues to her inner life, in the same way as do the gestures of a character on stage.

In reviewing *L'attrice del cuore*, in *Lo straniero* (n. 281) Renata Molinari defines letters as "the form that most closely corresponds to the nomadism of theatre. [...] In fact, leafing through Pezzana's life, her inclinations, her place in the world, the step that allows her to have such a precise view of reality is most fully encompassed by the concept of nomadism. Her peregrinations between characters and the places she is forced to inhabit, the different conditions of life

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she has to become acquainted with on stage or to go on stage, allow her to gain a precise perspective on reality, free of pretence."

Letters match the fragmentation of theatre people's lives: their discontinuity as far as recipient, time, place and tone reproduce the discontinuity between the extra-daily character of performance and daily life, between public and private, between movement and repetition, or between *Inside/outside*, to quote the title of Vanda Monaco Westerstal's play that was inspired by Pezzana's letters.

Letters seem to support the transitions from performance time and leaving the stage by offering themselves as a receptacle for the emotional surplus produced during the performance and by providing 'compressed' autobiographical ingredients. This important function of epistolary communication within theatre life is evidenced by the great number of very substantial correspondence archives preserved by actresses and actors. Written under difficult circumstances because of the itinerant nature of their work, these writings were often dictated by urgent subjective needs as testified by Duse's tendency to write even more letters to her girlfriends when she could have visited them in person, than she wrote when she was travelling.

Epistolary writing presupposes a dramatic first person subject who is not stationary, and creates a dialectic between the inclination towards introspection and dialogic tension, in a sort of mental *mise en scène* of both oneself and the other; it creates the impression of being engaged in a dialogue, even when the interlocutor is absent.

Theatre is a place that creates community, a bond that requires deep understandings or at least relationships that are not inert at an emotional level. There can be a confluence of sensibilities as well as ideal projec-

tions that are not born of the texts performed but penetrate them from the terrain of actual, experienced life and human relationships. The actress needs friends; this need is tied to her creative process (both to stimulate it and to quieten it down after the performance) and to her wanting pleasure. But while it is true that anything can be said, the same is not true when it comes to writing. Certain secrets must be revealed in person, according to Pezzana, but what is not said creates a subtext that seems to lend depth to the letters.

On the other hand, letters are not merely responses to a search for balance between theatre and life; even when they don't directly address experiences on stage, they can reveal the 'inner visions' of the writer and some aspects of her ephemeral art. Thus, as far as Giacinta Pezzana is concerned, we discover that epistolary writing and performance are driven by a single impulse: com-*passion* - that can turn both towards the tragic and the comic. Specific letters that are completely devoid of links to daily routine are conscious exercises in dramaturgy, capable of re-creating in their entirety whole environments, situations and people. In these cases, the actress may repeat herself not because of a fault in her memory but rather because she seeks to build a text almost in the form of a monologue.

I will take some examples from the letters of Pezzana when she was already old. The first letter was written in Ravenna, on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1908, and was addressed to Luigi Rasi, an actor, teacher and author of the book *I comici italiani - Biografia, bibliografia, iconografia*. Luigi Rasi had asked her for archival materials, and Giacinta Pezzana answers that she saved the writings of others rather than her own. She had writings from such actors as Tommaso Salvini, Adelaide Ristori and Luigi Bellotti Bon, as well as the



Giacinta Pezzana. Photo: Laura Mariani archive

costume she wore when she performed the role of Hamlet. She then alludes to a bust of herself that had been sculpted by Pietro Magni, and to one of her own feminist writings, part of the collection *Ad Adelaide Cairoli le donne italiane*, an album that had been appreciated by Luigi Rasi's wife, Teresa Sormanni, a very committed intellectual. And most importantly, she openly declares the anomaly of being an actress who intensely loved Art, both the theatre and writing, but didn't really love herself or wealth. This hints at the existence of a tension between the person and the stage, an admission that would have been unthinkable for actresses such as Adelaide Ristori.

Most esteemed Mr. Rasi,

*I save many things that belong to others but very few of my own... I have loved myself so little! ... Art was, and is still, a necessity for my soul, and I completely neglected glory and*

*wealth. ...*

*For example I saved all, or almost all, Authors' permissions: I have letters by Salvini, Ristori, Bellotti Bon, etc.; the complete costume of Hamlet, but I gave the tobacconist all the reviews from Russian, Mexican, Havana and South American newspapers. Why?... Who knows! [Maybe I gave them away] at a time I felt the highest disdain for things that don't always go right, in this crazy, stupid, unjust world that I am an integral part of! Perhaps I have a few pieces left from the start of my career. But all of those things, which I am willing to transfer to you for an adequate compensation, I do not keep with me, but rather in some chests I have stored in Catania.*

*You will have to wait until next summer when I retire. I also have a magnificent marble bust of myself, sculpted by Magni, a sculptor from Milan, which is stored with the Saffi family in S. Varano, near Forlì. I meant it to be displayed on my tomb, but it's all the same... a Museum is a sepulchre for the body and the soul (see Mummies). I thank you for writing even though you weren't feeling well. I also thank your most esteemed, intellectual wife who was so kind as to assign such a high value to my words on the album, a value that they actually lack...*

*As far as me coming back to Florence, if it were up to me, I would never lay eyes on that city again (yes the city of flowers, but underneath the flowers is where the snakes hide... those journalists!). Audiences in Florence won't be crying because of my absence. I find coming back to Florence useless since there are actually no audiences for me there! So much better for me and them! My most cordial greetings to you and your wife*

Giacinta Pezzana

*My warmest and most sincere wishes for a recovery of your precious health, together with my best wishes for the New Year to both of you. The second letter, written in Buenos Aires*

*Caro, carissima...*

*Coraggio! coraggio per Dio! Tu avresti  
bisogno di qualche non parola per quanto  
affettuosa. La Banca del cuore non  
hanno ancora pensato a fondarla!  
La tua posizione mi addolora quan-  
to... la vita che è identica alla tua  
tu...  
correa  
la salute zoppicante.  
Come italiana sono felice ed entusia-  
sta del nostro trionfo glorioso. come  
Artista ~~la tua~~ sono arrivata del  
mio nulla. Per chi sente sempre  
nel mio animo tutta la fraternità  
sacro che ha riscaldato ed illuminato  
tutto la mia vita!  
Sento tutta l'amarezza del tuo tempo  
presente... e... non posso sollevarmi  
come altra volta tu hai salvato me!  
Come ne soffre!*

Giacinta Pezzana's last letter to Sibilla Aleramo

on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1911, is addressed to the writer Sibilla Aleramo (Rina) the author of *Una donna* a 'rupture' novel written in 1906, in the wake of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. At that time Sibilla Aleramo had separated from Giovanni Cena, the man for whom she had left her husband and child. Giacinta Pezzana too talks about her disappointment with her last companion, Pasqualino Distefano, the man for whom she had moved to Sicily after leaving the stage in 1887. Thus art and work are recalled as strong points of identity when facing the constraints or fragility associated with the "dream of love" and old age: when "everyone will leave us" and the past will loom large with "its dried out memories". At that point in her life, it was her teaching activities at the Escuela Experimental de Arte Dramático in Montevideo that kept her alive while films reawakened her artistic

curiosity.

My dearest Rina,

Don't you believe for a moment that I celebrated my birthday: these things are not suitable for wandering pilgrims... We artists grow unaccustomed to celebrating the joys of domestic life. We have no home, no family, no habitual friends... All we have is a nest, like swallows, but we are not allowed to come back to it every spring. Mine is down there... on the enchanted island, which by now has lost all attraction for me. I would be happy to see it again, for the memories that are there... on those cliffs that I once stepped on with such joy in my heart and that have now become a sepulchre for a love that is dead. It was a great love; it gave me twenty years of the most complete, pure and calm happiness, up to the day when it completely vanished just like anything that is too beautiful to withstand the test of time! I would have died of it had it not been for a divine friend who opened her arms to me! Art! She told me "Rise and walk to me!" I was more an artist than a woman, so Art took pity on my lost happiness and made me live again! My strength, health, voice and memory are still resisting and help me struggle against... the faith of my birth.

But here I am writing about myself, whereas I should be only enquiring about you, about your new position... that is the present state of your soul.

Do not complain if G[iovanni] cannot be a brother to you, nor should you expect it. If it were so easy for him to turn into a brother, it would mean that he hadn't loved you.

I wrote to him and he answered that he now works a lot, as all strong souls do when misfortune strikes. Love for you has not subsided in his heart and he still holds an unchanged and dignified love for you. He cannot change the name of that great affection. It will change only in time; slowly it will turn into a sweet brotherly friendship. However, he cannot do

that at this time. You must understand him and not expect him to give you cynicism in return... he is the one who is wounded; he is the one who has been abandoned!

He has nothing but good things to say about you and begs me to be your friend now more than ever. Of course he asked me not to let you know what he writes about you so as not to cause you pain, but my intent is to console you by letting you know that he is not your enemy.

Fate violently strikes and destroys two existences that seemed joined by an indestructible bond: it is too bitter to swallow with a smile, nor is the hand that wounds the most suitable one to soothe the wound.

Leave the responsibility for the cure to that infallible doctor that is time and in the future you two may be able to shake hands without enthusiasm or rancour.

Enjoy your present happiness and draw such noble inspirations from it as your new love... the future sits above the sun and the heavens, so beware not to get blinded if you wish to discover what it has in store for you! Do not look up there; enjoy the present. Time shall teach you that what happens in life was supposed to happen... what you call fate and is commonly contained in one word that has no meaning! Destiny! Certainly! There is no remedy for what happens and let us console ourselves by saying "it was destined to be!" I have tamed Destiny with the serenity of my soul and my disdain for everything that deserves to be despised.

Life is like a movie: agreeable and disagreeable things are projected on the screen of the soul, until the time comes to put out the lights... and rest in nothingness.

The present projections are enchanting for you, look at them, devour them and be happy. For you the time to put the lights out is still far away, so many hours of travel separate us from each other.

I am happy that you are getting close to Maria B[orgese]. She is a rebel who thinks like us. She

is a very sweet soul and a faithful friend. Now I am pursuing something else. If our President (I'm speaking of the President of Uruguay) is able to fulfil his government programme, I am committed to setting up the Uruguayan Theatre. Montevideo is a much more intellectual capital than Buenos Aires and I believe that my efforts will be much more effective here... Argentinean actors are at a comparable level with the dialect actors in Rome - ask Maria B what kind of hyenas were with me in Livorno. They are dogs and vain ones at that, the ones out here, but at least I am not the one paying them, and, furthermore, I don't give a damn about their stupid vanity. In Montevideo they are more serious.

You want to know something about where I live? In a beautiful house that belongs to a woman from Genoa who has a herb seller's education, and was raised by the nuns... an innocent and a virgin after giving birth. She is forty-four years old but still has fun dressing up her doll. She sleeps between her doll and her daughter, a nice looking young girl (who has a very strong resemblance to her godfather) and she condemns her husband, a most exquisite person, to sleep alone. She is very Catholic: her daughter disdains her father as much as she loves her godfather... the voice of blood never lies! I have a sparrow that causes me great joy, it is so well trained! By the way you never told me whatever happened to my swift... Is it alive? Did it fly away? Forgive me for being so silly, but I am trying to get a smile out of you. A hug and all my long standing affection.

Cinta

Finally, here is a third letter from Giacinta Pezzana to Aleramo. It was written from Acicastello on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1918, and is the last one we have from the actress who was to die on November 4<sup>th</sup> of the following year. In it she expresses her sorrow for not being able to help her friend financially as well as her satisfaction with the outcome of

World War I. Even though the sun had set on her career as an artist, she reiterates that "the flame" of Art has warmed her whole life.

In the letter two lines are clearly erased and the sentence suffers from this erasure. This is an anomaly and a tangible sign of physical suffering. However, it does not prevent her from smiling about herself or others, nor does it keep her from soberly but touchingly alluding to her illness, which she has endured without complaint "in the Italian way!" It "was the consequence of a very painful operation! They scraped my uterus". The operation seemed to link her to the sea, "raging and unhappy like herself" like her, continuously undergoing "a scraping of its entrails", because, "the poverty of the wretched fishermen is so great".

My dear, dearest

Courage! Courage my God! You need money rather than affectionate words - they have still not thought of founding Heart Banks! Your situation pains me as much as... my own that is exactly like yours: you [...] concerning bad health.

As an Italian I am happy and enthusiastic about our glorious triumph, as a finished artist I am sad about my nullity although I still feel in my soul all the sacred flame that has warmed and illuminated all my life!

I feel all the sourness of our present need... and... I cannot haul you up like you have saved me at other times! How I suffer for this! My illness was the consequence of a very painful surgery! The scraping of the uterus which I bore as an Italian!

Not a cry! Not a lament! The doctors were full of admiration! A glory to which I did not aspire... Now I am better, almost... still weak and with an aristocratic appetite.

My sea is enraged and unhappy like I am! It is

also subject to a continuous scraping of the insides so that the misery of the poor fishermen is great.

I would like to prove to you that I am really fond of you, by sending you some money but I could not even give a gift to the postman and from how he greets me I understand his esteem for me has diminished. "Ah! God of gold of the world! Faust is right". I enrich you with sincere wishes and prayers for you to feel better, dear good person deserving some good luck! But think of Giorgio Sand who fought an equal battle with the God of gold! Forward my Sibilla: a new triumph will make precious even the present hours of financial troubles. I kiss your brave soul. Yours,

Cinta

Translated from Italian by Pina Piccolo

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