

Mirella Schino

## Special Ink for Letters

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or of a biography,  
letters are simply  
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they are amusing.*

Dear Julia,

I thought of writing a letter to you about India, but not on theatre-dance or Indian techniques. I wanted to make the most of what the very form of a letter allows, those digressions, leaps and associations that regular writing does not permit, so that I could tell you about a temple I happened to visit. I was there by chance, believe me; it was a modern temple, of rare ugliness. It was also huge, a real monument to bad taste. Inside it, giant photographs of the spiritual leader, a 'saint' who is still alive (still good-looking in his old age, definitely charming when he was young), towered over lots of marble statues and many women and men dressed in red, the colour of Shakti, the female strength.

Even from the photographs you could perceive the spiritual leader's strong interest in the female gender or, as they say there, his devotion to Shakti. The holy man enjoys people's appreciation because of his support of the poor (dowries to girls who do not have anything and so on), in which it seems he invests a small part of the many offerings he receives, and for the respect with which he looks at women. The respect he shows pushes him even to accept women as priestesses in his temple. I think this is a unique case in India.

So, the marble statues were horrible, the holy man, at least at first sight, very dubious. But the eyes of those women in red, who had at last risen to a dignity and role that was previously denied to them, are not easy to put aside and forget. Cheated? I do not know. Maybe it was their only chance. Maybe it is also quite silly to be so tempted by priesthood as to serve in a false temple. I thought about theatre and the dubious reputation that it gave to actresses until about a hundred years ago; an ambiguous shadow that yet was strongly connected to their only chance of being in charge, to acquire not only beauty and charm but craft and authority as well.

I wanted to write to you about all this - women, sanc-

tity, fraud, theatre and power. But then I was distracted by a sentence in your message, where you wonder whether letters can be "an important source of theatre history that enables us to hear the voices of the silent women of the past". A question I am not able to answer, but that made me think.

I cannot tell you whether letters are a tool to reconstruct the voices of the silent women of the past, even though the study of theatre is my job, but all things considered, I do not believe so and maybe I would not want them to be used for this purpose. I am saying this honestly and without certainty. I think that a letter is 'unstable' material that easily transforms itself. It is vulnerable. A letter, read after time has passed, or by a person who is not the recipient, is a very easy target. Nothing lends itself to satire or to judgement more easily. Nothing appears more easily as funny or overambitious.

A special ink should be invented for letters that disappears after a couple of days and leaves the page blank. Thackeray said so, not me. After some years letters look strange and become dangerous, they witness every hypocrisy and defect, they show every vice, they keep the memory of every wickedness; they are like footprints in the mud.

When we try to find the lost plot of an event or of a biography, letters are simply documents, one trace among the others. They are a charming path, difficult to follow, because they are full of holes, of implicit, therefore buried, information; so full of contradictions as to be mysterious; they are amusing. If they are read in this way, as documents, the rest of history protects them. As *objects* of analysis, as the mark of a vanished voice, as clues to reconstruct a human being, his or her reasons, and logic, letters are very important, of course, or even inevitable, but they become something else.

I even have doubts about whether it is

right to publish them, unless you do it with... I do not know what to call it: without professionalism, without the tricks of the trade, but with *innocence*. A letter is above all the unwilling reflection of what we are not aware of, therefore of the worst. By reading from a distance, by reading professionally, you cannot help noticing mechanically: here she is lying, here she acts with her usual affectation, here you can see her vanity, here her meanness, here her selfishness. In contrast the closeness with which we read a letter addressed to us has a lot to do with compassion. But anyway I think that the value of letters is only indirect; they highlight, but only as a mirror, and only what is unrelated to them.

I remember my beginnings, as a student. I was at University learning about theatre. It was there that I learned about the poor nineteenth century Italian actors (poor in the literal sense, not as a metaphor), whom I eventually studied for many years, and I also got to know about the experiences of group theatre that were born in those years in Italy and grew and blossomed like wild plants. It was 1977. Imprinting is a curious thing. Even now, after I have studied for so many years, I do not have a passion for theatre in itself, for its trends, its future. What I like is what I discovered at that time: people who make theatre, some of those you can meet inside that world. And then I like theatre as an object of study, so evanescent, elusive, surprising - a permanent challenge.

I was at University, which in Italy was also the place where the most extreme group theatre had put its soul and roots. So, for a thesis or an exam, anyway for something strictly connected to my studies, I was sent around to meet and interview theatre groups. In this way I met Teresa Telara, who at the time was in her twenties and worked in Piccolo Teatro di Pontedera, a theatre group influenced by



A caricature of Eleonora Duse. It is a drawing by one of her minor actors, Ciro Galvani, who remained with her for many years, also following her on her last tour. His colleagues said he was very much in love with Eleonora Duse, and from his caricatures the affection of someone who has been patient with a smile for years shines through. The caricature is from 1899, published by Luigi Rasi in his book, *La Duse*, of 1901. It shows Eleonora Duse during rehearsals for *Anthony and Cleopatra*, at the Lessing Theatre in Berlin. Since she was an actress/manager, she is at the centre in street clothes interpreting Cleopatra and at the same time she is directing the rest of the company. All the actors in costume appear to be quite exhausted (it is said that Eleonora Duse could make all her colleagues cry during rehearsals to draw out of them all their creative potential). As a frame around the main scene, Galvani has drawn a series of sketches of Duse-Cleopatra on stage: dying, questioning the messenger, in despair at hearing the announcement of Anthony's wedding, etc. Perhaps it is not a drawing that says a lot about the art of this great actress, but if we look at the compassion and care with which it is constructed we can perceive something of Duse's turbulent presence at rehearsals and feel her centrality, dynamism, effort and power as a bomb that explodes in the middle of a group of tired actors, inevitably provoking their reactions. After all caricatures are documents of a very similar nature to letters.

Odin Teatret, which years later became Grotowski's home and shelter.

In the same year I also read the first

'archive' letter of my life, and I did not even read it in a library, but in a book. It was a letter from Eleonora Duse, dated 1893, a

public letter, addressed to a writer who was then famous, Hermann Sudermann. Duse speaks of a character that she was going to play, Magda, an actress who was pushed towards theatre by her vocation but also, as happened in those days, by life events: she was pregnant, having been seduced, and she wanted to run away from her bourgeois home. She was full of *joie de vivre* and she wanted to act. Later she became famous, just as now she, Eleonora Duse, was famous. The play began ten years after Magda left her father's house.

The letter is very short, don't worry, I will not end up speaking about nineteenth century theatre. It reads:

*Your Magda has worked for ten years.  
The person who is writing - has worked  
for twenty years.  
The difference is great, if you consider that  
this is a woman who - unlike Magda - counts  
the days to leaving theatre.  
Magda was seventeen years old - at home.  
Not at all the person who writes. When  
she was fourteen a long skirt was given to  
her and she was told: "You have to act".  
There is some difference between the  
two women.  
All in all, Magda belongs to you like a creation  
of yours; the other lives and dresses like the  
rest of the world.*

It is nice, isn't it? Only Eleonora Duse was able to be so arrogant. In a way she really puts him in his place, poor Sudermann. Maybe he had dared draw a parallel between his heroine and her, the famous Duse. And for Duse it is important to insist: I was told, just after adolescence, that I *had* to act. I did not have a quiet life, no caresses, no peace, no comfort. I had neither a family, nor inclination. I did not have a *Heimat* (that is also the title of the play of which Magda is the protagonist).

You *have* to act. That is why in my mind this letter is associated with Teresa Telara. She does not say: I like, I want, I wish to do theatre. On the contrary she tells us how, at a certain point, somebody said to her: I am sorry, darling, you *have* to act. You are grown up. It is time.

Does it seem the opposite of what happened to the young actors of the Italian Third Theatre? It is, of course. But opposites coincide.

Teresa was beautiful. She still is: a beautiful lady. She was also very nice. I was almost the same age, a couple of years younger, but she looked different to me; older, mature. I perceived her determination, but she never spoke to me of it. I felt that something pulled her from inside, as if she had a rope coming out from her belly. I do not even know whether I admired her, surely I did not have any vocation of this kind, leading me in any direction.

But when I saw her 'on stage' (in the street, actually, during a parade entitled *Arme e santo*) I realised that need exists. You *have* to act. Not necessarily because there is no bread or because it is the only family trade. But also for something that has the same strength as the need for bread. Teresa was tense, barefoot, intense, she was like an arrow that has been shot and cannot but fly. God forgive me if I say that I think that that was her highest moment as an actress. But maybe a single moment is enough, and also a single spectator.

Here it is. This is all. Sorry if it's so little, maybe India would have been better. And I do not want to tell you about the end of the Teresa of theatre (you know it after all). It was not tragic at all, on the contrary, very honourable, only, that "you have to", at a certain point, failed her.

For Duse, instead, the "you *have* to act" lasted. Maybe the bread, in the end, wins over the soul, as I have always suspected.

She did not leave the theatre as soon as it became possible for her: even when she was old, in peace, quiet, also without financial worries, and she had been away from the stage for years, she ended up coming back to her audience. Without Teresa I do not think I would have fully understood that need is also a burden.

By the way, one of the reasons why I do not feel like publishing letters (except in a completely *protected* way and unless they are only one document among others, useful to speak of theatre), lies in the review that I read many years ago, when the love letters Duse wrote to an Italian writer, Arrigo Boito, were published. Many laughed at the writing by such a great actress, now uncovered in her simpering with her lover, exchanging childish and stuttering nicknames. Later Duse really became a wonderful letter writer, but at that time she was still young. And she did not write to Boito to compose literature. I was horrified by the reviews, I felt such a rage that I have never been able to communicate. A lonely woman, a cold bed, I thought. And these inhuman efforts, these terms of endearment and coded sentences, this purple ink: every-

thing to warm up a love at a distance, a love so blatantly doomed to die. But it was above all when the mockery made sense that I felt the horror inside me for those who were judging, even for myself as a reader. It takes compassion to read letters.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

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