

The Secret Journals of Desiree von Wertheimstein

by

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Characters.

Desiree von Wertheimstein

Eleonora Duse

Gabrielle D'Annunzio/ Lina Poleti/ Enrichetta Duse

Voices of Stage Doorman/ The Press/ Husband of Enrichetta/ Viennese Friends

The action of the play takes place in Vienna, Austria, Italy and America from 1896-1924. Desiree and Duse age nearly thirty years over the course of the performance. Desiree is in her late '20's, Duse, in her late '30's, when the play begins. The parts of D'Annunzio, Poleti and Enrichetta can be played by the same female or male or transgendered actor. There are two acts.

Author's Note.

Desiree von Wertheimstein is a vital, clever, histrionic and funny woman. While Eleonora Duse is more practical and grounded, if tortured and emotional. The irony and fun lies in the fact that though Duse is the great actress it is Desiree's dramatics which are the source of amusement and entertainment ---for Duse as well as for the audience.

ACT ONE
Scene

Desiree sits up in bed. She is well covered up to her neck in blankets.

DESIREE

A new century's coming. Isn't it so? I'm tumbling inside. Don't I have the right? Anything can happen. And it will! It's a fact. Down through the ages. Never mind I'm stupid. I don't know history. The way men do. Never having studied. Not allowed. But you can't control that trembling and thrilling.

Put me a way! "For a rest." I won't talk. I'm on the verge. Full of secrets. You won't get them. Lips clenched. I've made a vow. Pry me open. Go on, try, then. I'm in hiding, getting ready. You can't find me. Every morning I wake up to wait for that thing to happen that will change my life. The '*female* malady,' I've got, they say. Prodding and pulling. Leering. Stopped eating. Teeth like a clamp. Lost my menstrual. Now they put leeches on my thighs. Tickle me silly, and I laugh my head off. "The asylum's next," father shouts. Bellows over cold stone. My fire waits for something else. Do I care? I say to myself. (I will not speak to *them*, whatever they try.) Send me off, then. Send me as far as your greedy-money buys. Send me to the Far Sea islands.

Caught me loving on myself, they did. Shivering and gleeful. My, my. "Just how can we marry her, I ask you," mother's crying on the stairs.

I've got a diagnosis. 'Classic hysteric'. 'Morally unbalanced'. With 'rampant delusions.' And now this silence. And refusal to eat. Force feed her. There's an idea! Stop this choking up of nothing. Exhaust her. Physical activity and diverting games. No reading, god forbid. Horseback riding and ballet instruction. That should do it . . .

The horse felt better than leeches. Between my thighs. Made me shiver. Made me sing out. *Off* I flew! Ballet sent me leaping through the air. *Off* I flew!

(directly to the audience) My name is Desiree. That's something like desire—which cannot be controlled. It's the turn-of-the-century. And there is something inside of me. It's thrilling me. The doctor lays me down to listen. He wants stories? I give him. Write down for him:

(making it up as she goes) "I hear voices. Under water. In my bath."

He scribbles in his notebook. Pleased as a dumpling with himself. (I don't tell him that the voices are my own.) He should shave. And wash. He stinks. Crumbs dangling. And always scratching at his beard. And his you-know-where. Pen wriggling. Like the leeches on my thighs. I burn him off by lying.

I want out! The twentieth Century! I will not sit. I will not waltz. I'll run. I will not dress. I will not pose. I'll starve. I will not smile. Or hear or see them. I'll put my eyes out. I'll cut my tongue off. I'll curse. I won't get out of bed anymore. No, I won't. Thank god, even if the end is near. Being Jew. Being girl.

(A pause. A complete change passes over Desiree as if she is suddenly bathed in salvation. And she is bathed in light.)

And then I see . . . Take me to the theatre, mother! Eleonora Duse is coming to Vienna!

(DESIREE explodes onto her feet, standing on the bed. We see that she is in a straitjacket.)

End of Scene.

Scene

Lights up on Desiree dressed in street clothes.

DESIREE

How can I describe what I saw that night. Eleonora Duse? Imagine. Woman. Hardly flesh. More a pale veil over blood and bone. Rivers of vein. Hair streaming. Her eyes. A look in them. Of not belonging. To the play. To this world. Eyes of dissent. On fire. Eyes of difference. Queer eyes. One didn't care about the play. Italian words. More song than speech. Same old story. Silly and tragic. But Duse . . . She is freedom. She is desire.

(suddenly)

She is the Twentieth Century.

(DESIREE begins to clap wildly and shout "Brava! Brava! Brava!" She whistles, screams, reentering her experience of the performance.)

I wrote her. In broken Italian. Expecting . . . ? The doctor noted, gloating, my hysteria was 'lifting'.

(DESIREE stands utterly still, looking straight ahead. The following is heard as voice over.)

February 7th, 1896. Vienna. Dear Madame Duse. I'll rush to the point. My greatest wish is to serve you. I'm devoted. I only ask for my upkeep. I have a small appetite. Am anxious to see the world. (And the back of Vienna.) Though I have never cooked. I can learn. Or cleaned house. I will scrub. Your home must be a church. Wherever you are. To your art! That I can see to. I've never been a seamstress. I am not good with my hands. But I will learn anything. Make it all smooth for you. Like gliding on ice. I will water your flowers. Might we meet? Utterly yours, Desiree von Wertheimstein. P.S. Save me!

End of scene.

Scene

Desiree stands outside an imposing stage door. She takes several deep breaths and begins to knock. A peephole in the door slides open. Desiree says nothing. A sigh is heard behind the door and the peephole slides shut. She knocks again.

VOICE OF STAGE DOORMAN

If you've got nothing to say, bugger off. And if you've got it in your head, anyone wants to see you. You're the nineteenth'll be turned away this afternoon.

DESIREE

I'm not speaking to a door.

VOICE OF STAGE DOORMAN

Sorry for you, then. This is company policy. This here is how things are done in the theatre. We're not a human society, you know.

DESIREE

Humane.

VOICE OF STAGE DOORMAN

Have it your way. On you go.

DESIREE

I'll kick this door down first.

VOICE OF STAGE DOORMAN

Miss. Suit yourself. I'm off to take a leak.

DESIREE

Open this door! You have to open this door!

(DESIREE begins to kick the door. She is furious. Suddenly the door is flung open. There stands ELEONORA DUSE in all her glory—a look of exasperation at the disturbance on her face. DESIREE is caught, leg in mid-air, about to kick.)

End of scene.

Scene

Duse's dressing room. Desiree is seated, sobbing. Duse stands watching her, in costume, in preparation for her evening performance.

DUSE

Still here? Three hour's it's been. Still sobbing?

(She sighs, shakes her head, worried. She pours a glass of something in a decanter and brings it to DESIREE. She bends down to wipe DESIREE's eyes with a hankerchief.)

Take a sip. Go on. This'll bring you round.

(DESIREE knocks it back, then looks helplessly at DUSE, on fire. DUSE laughs.)

Russian. Purest there is. I'm sorry. That was mean of me. Stopped your tears, though.

(DUSE and DESIREE smile at each other. Both appear rather shy, suddenly, and turn their eyes away. DUSE grows serious, businesslike.)

Got your letter. I am looking for someone. Funny, isn't it?

(DUSE picks up the letter from her table and refers to it.)

You mention here you cannot cook?

DESIREE

(sitting up, ready to be grilled) Why should I lie?

DUSE

You warn me that you do not sew?

DESIREE

Not even a button.

DUSE

(intrigues and amused) Ah! You're a rich man's daughter.

(DUSE sits.)

Pampered and served. What can you do? Tell me why on earth I should hire you?

DESIREE

Personally, I am very clean.

DUSE

(holding up the letter) Though you've never cleaned.

DESIREE

Right. But I am compulsively clean when it comes to my body. I like a very hot bath, don't you? Full enough to do a dead man's float. I can eat a pound of chocolate in one sitting. When I am not sick to death. With Vienna. With them. But otherwise I hardly eat, at all. I run. Very fast. When they're not tying me down. I'm an early riser. If I can face getting out of bed, at all. I love to sing.

DUSE

Now we're getting somewhere. I love to be sung to. It puts me to sleep.

DESIREE

But I am tone deaf. So they tell me.

DUSE

You write: That you want to be *saved*.

(DESIREE nods vehemently, overwhelmed. She cannot speak. DUSE studies her, more and more bemused.)

No pressing ties? Here in Vienna? Duties of the heart, say? Responsibilities?

DESIREE

Madame Duse. I'm queasy from floating. My body drifting down below me. I've been wandering up and down the corners of my room. Nothing holds me here.

DUSE

You must have a lover? You're a pretty little creature. In a plain and earnest kind of way.

DESIREE

Nothing seems real, does it?

DUSE

You're asking an actress?

(They laugh together.)

DESIREE

No one's ever loved me, Madame Duse. And quite frankly, between you and me, it's a relief. They'd have forced marriage on me.

(sharing a great secret)

But I can act. I'm not La Duse. But I can play a mad scene. I can make myself faint. Just like that. And shudder so violently my hair stands on end.

DUSE

Oh, you must teach me that one!

DESIREE

(with a gasp, covering her mouth) You mean. You mean you'll have me. . .?

DUSE

(sighing) Look. There's endless correspondence.

(She gets up and paces the room.) Are you good at making excuses? And flattery? And saying no? So that it sounds like yes. Kindly. Yet firmly? I can't tolerate visitors. Before or after a play. Most people I will not tolerate at all. It will be your job to keep them at bay.

(observing DESIREE with pleasure)

You have a look that's trusted. Lies on your tongue would swirl into sugar.

DESIREE

(rising) Madam Duse. It is not for nothing that they've all given up on me. I get what I want. Your desire becomes mine. Try me for month. A week.

DUSE

I breathe poorly. I'm not a party. Desiree.

(DUSE looks into DESIREE's eyes for several seconds.)

Let's see how it works, eh? I think I'm looking in particular for someone who can make me laugh.

(DESIREE clasps her hands and looks heavenward.)

DESIREE

Oh! Thank you!

(She falls dramatically at DUSE's feet.)

Thank you, Madame Duse.

(DUSE laughs and laughs at this extravagant performance.)

End of scene.

Scene

Desiree rises from a desk, stacked with correspondence and moves forward.

DESIREE

Gentlemen. Miss Duse asks that you forgive her for not taking this opportunity to wish you her best in person. She has been on the road, as you know, for three long weeks. And she is rehearsing a new play due to open in two day's time. She eagerly invites you to join her at the theatre. Where she hopes you will enjoy her *work*.

I can only tell you that a great artist requires rest and privacy. But then you know that, anyway. She thanks you, members of the press, for being so patient and understanding.

(Lights down sharply and then up.)

Yes. I know, she did, indeed, say, Mrs. Flannery, that she would meet with you this morning. She is broken-hearted—having to postpone a visit she so looked forward to. But she had a very long evening in rehearsal. Unexpected problems. That arise in the theatre. As *you* well know. She begs your forgiveness. And asks me to convey how deeply she appreciated your charming poem. Til the next, Mrs. Flannery. God bless you, for your patient understanding.

(Lights down sharply, then up.)

I did tell her you were back, Mr. Roso, yes. I did. Certainly. And, once again, I'm afraid I have to ask for your patient understanding. Miss Duse does not 'have time'. Time has Miss Duse. If Miss Duse were to give 'only' five minutes to every admirer of her artistry, she would no longer be the artist you admire. But she is flattered and charmed with your flowery compliments. She thanks you with all her heart. Her rooms are perfumed gardens, planted by hundreds like yourself. And she is inspired, with every whiff, to give her best for you *on stage*.

(Lights down sharply, then up.)

I beg you not to bother her with receipts and houses tonight. She's been asleep for ages. Tomorrow, again, she performs. She is so grateful for the success of this tour which she holds in no small measure to be your success as well. She is indebted to you. In more ways than she can tell. Bless you for your patience. And your understanding.

(Lights down sharply, and up.)

One more step, and I will call the police. How on earth did you get in here! Out of here! God, help me! Don't oblige me to scream. The company is rehearsing. Your previous messages were conveyed.

(She makes a gesture, both threatening and guarded.)

Over my dead body.

(She lets out a blood-curdling scream.)

(Lights down sharply. Light up on DUSE who stands in the entrance to the room. She is fuming. She looks daggers at DESIREE.)

DUSE

How did that lunatic get into my rehearsal? Who let him in? He says you let him in! Desiree. You let that man in? How dare you! Answer me! Answer! What am I keeping you for? Huh? Eh? Answer!

DESIREE

I beg your pardon. He barged past. My arm is black and blue. He threw me across the room. Could have killed me. The maniac. "Over my dead body" I screamed at him. And he came at me, and viciously pushed me away. I can barely lift my arm.

DUSE

Blasted. Ruined. The rehearsal was ruined. The men had to restrain him. One of the extras broke a tooth. He was grabbing at my skirts. Desiree. To put it mildly. You've been told not to open the door—

DESIREE

I beg your pardon, I most certainly did not open the door. I found him here already and risked my life—such as it is in your eyes—to get him out. A 'thank you' for trying would be gratefully received. Not this . . . brutality.

DUSE

Ruined. Blasted. An afternoon of work. And I'm to perform tonight? I'll cancel it. Cancel it! Go on. That's it. Settled. My mind's made up. No rehearsal. No show. Go on. Hop to it. Cancel it. Ruined. Ruined. By a maniacal intruder and incompetent help.

(DESIREE freezes.)

Shattering. I don't have the energy. Cancel it.

(DUSES's rage is over. She sinks into a chair. DESIREE remains frozen, her back to DUSE, and silent.)

(after a time) They can have their money back. I don't care. . . . Why are you so quiet? I *said* cancel it.

DESIREE

'Help', am I? So it's come to that.

DUSE

Silly goose. Don't you get dramatic. I've had enough drama for one day.

DESIREE

Tyrant!

DUSE

Goose, don't start with me!

DESIREE

Heartless.

DUSE

Don't get hysterical. My nerves can't stand it.

DESIREE

Actress! Inside and out! Who knew what you really felt? Switching on and off. All this time and now it's out: 'Help', she calls me. I feel faint.

DUSE

Good God! It slipped out. Mean's nothing. Let's see your arm.

DESIREE

(lifting her sleeve and showing DUSE) Slipped out? Like a knife slips in.

DUSE

(examining her arm, but quickly abandoning it) Desiree. Shut up. Christ! You go on and on. Dwelling, dwelling. You cling to me. My every word and thought. You suffocate me. There is a world out there, my girl. Real things to cry about.

DESIREE

Your affairs are my world.

DUSE

I have to be alone. I need peace. I have no peace in my own rooms!

(She is leaving.)

DESIREE

You! You! You! I'm nothing, am I? You'd abandon me. Like you did your own child, after all. Should I be surprised?

(DUSE stops, leans against the wall. Her breathing becomes difficult.)

DUSE

I'm a worthless mother. But I did not abandon my child. I would have slit my throat to keep her away from the theatre. Cancel the show. I can't breathe.

DESIREE

(suddenly helpless) Let's lie down, my love. Let's lie you down. All's forgiven. You're the sweetest mother in the world and the world's greatest star. Look how she loves you. Look at the letters she sends. And I'd give my life to protect you. What a fiasco! There's enough trouble. Why do we fight? Eh? We'll cancel soon enough if you feel we must. But let's rest now.

(DESIREE leads DUSE towards her bedroom off stage.)

DUSE

I'd have never seen her again to keep her from the theatre!

End of scene.

Scene

A huge bed. It's inhabitants are unrecognizable at the scene's opening. Suddenly, DESIREE jolts up from one side of the bed. She remains sitting up in bed throughout the following.

DESIREE

It's 1900. Good Lord. Last night! Well. What a party! They all went wild. Bent on making the night count—one last fling. . . . I've had such a nightmare. I was giving birth. Do I look like the mothering type? My stomach was a huge mound. Or rather, a small hill. I was thrashing and screaming and over me stood the 'kindly' faces of doctors I have known. Just their heads. No bodies attached. "I never asked for this child," I was crying. "Get it out." Next thing, out it popped. With torrents of my blood. Well. It was a monster. No arms. No legs. No head. It was a ball. It spun and spun and spun away. Into the distant sky. My blood became the sea. And then I saw that my child was the world. Where was I? God knows. There was nothing left of me. And today it's a new century. And here I am. Still here. Still me. These are my hands. My breasts. My belly. My nose. I've got a very funny feeling, though. A dread. When we should all be celebrating. Waltzing towards—what? I mean, times have never been brighter! Eleonora is lighting hearts all over Europe—all over the *world!* Besides, we're lucky to live through two centuries, don't you think? Some people only get one. It's exciting. This dread. It's only natural. Doesn't mean--can't mean—I mean to say, I was desperate for it and here it is. And now that it's come. There's no escape. No turning back. No way out. All this newness. And here we are in it. Nothing's as it was. Nothing feels safe. Rules out the window. ANARCHY, they're shouting in the streets. You just can't fall back on what you know.

(DESIREE slides back under the blankets and covers her head. DUSE jolts up from the other side of the bed and sits up.)

DUSE

After the party, I slipped into the deepest sleep. Immediately! For once in my *life!* And now—I've had the most awful dream. Wouldn't you know. You see, it was hottest summer in the middle of winter. My body felt on fire. From a terrible, suffocating heat. Something's up, I said. It's December 31st, 1899. Why is it so hot? What's going on? In the park, young lovers were strolling and laughing. Thrilled with the respite from winter's cold. "But there's something wrong," I called out. "Don't you think so?" They didn't answer. Didn't see me. As if we were separated by an invisible wall. They began to make love there on the grass. But there were snakes in the grass! They didn't see them! "Watch out for the snakes, for God's sake!" No answer. They couldn't hear me! I was on

stage. . . . It grew hotter and hotter. “The theatre’s on fire!” “Fire!” “Fire!” Crowds were screaming . . . running for their lives . . .

(DUSE slips back under the covers.)

End of scene.

Scene

DUSE and D'ANNUNZIO play out the following scene behind a scrim that separates DUSE's sitting room from the bedroom behind it. They can only be seen as silhouettes. Throughout the action, DESIREE sits downstage at her desk. She hears everything, registering her emotions through her face and gestures. She is a counterpoint and offers an often comic commentary on the scene behind her.

D'ANNUNZIO

This is not pleasant for me, either, Eleonora.

DUSE

Oh, I know it what it costs you. A bit of unease. It's tedious, isn't it? The chore of cleaning up—clearing the path. When you could be somewhere so much sweeter. Don't worry. I'm not keeping you. You'll be in her arms tonight. I'll be here. Left alone. With nothing. After everything . . .

D'ANNUNZIO

Why torture me! And yourself, Eleonora. We loved. And now it's past. There were fine times, too. Think of the poetry I made from those days. Be proud.

DUSE

You're a monster. My every thought went to serving your genius. What more can I give?

D'ANNUNZIO

It's too late. That's over between us now, Eleonora. I want nothing more. I'll be grateful for the rest of my life.

DUSE

Life in her arms. My life is over. I'm feeling desperate. Darling, Gabriele. This is not something my nerves can stand. I won't live through this.

D'ANNUNZIO

Good, good. Shhh. Let me hold you. One last time. Dear Eleonora.

DUSE

Don't.

(They embrace. DUSE sobs. DESIREE is full of exasperation.)

D'ANNUNZIO

Do you remember, Ellie? Those first hours? I begged you to let me in. Already famous, yes, but so green. Struck by what you alone could offer me.

DUSE

I did what I could. It wasn't enough.

D'ANNUNZIO

Enough?

DUSE

To keep you.

D'ANNUNZIO

My spirit is free. You knew that, Ellie. I'll always love you.

DUSE

Don't leave just yet.

D'ANNUNZIO

Eleonora. I have to go. I've –

DUSE

Someone's waiting, eh? A hot bed and that little bitch's arms, eh?

D'ANNUNZIO

Stop humiliating yourself. It doesn't suit you. I'm going.

DUSE

Just sit down. I have to say goodbye.

(He sits.)

Despite what you have done to me. Your plays are lifeboats in a sea of shit.

D'ANNUNZIO

If I'm allowed to breathe perhaps I can write and even live up to your belief in me.

DUSE

I'll be forgotten in twenty years. You will live on and on.

D'ANNUNZIO

I'm only a man. This gift. It's a cross. Beyond my power to control. My art is everything, Ellie. It has me in its grip.

(He is crying.)

DUSE

I know, darling boy. You're consumed by mystical truth. The spirits of light and dark. Shadow and burning sun. you see with the tortured eyes of the visionary . . .

D'ANNUNZIO

Only you understand me, Eleonora.

DUSE

One last kiss.

(They kiss. Moans and other sounds of lovemaking ensue. DESIREE moans and sobs from frustration, in unison. Lights down on the scrim.)

DESIREE

(blowing her nose, pulling herself together) I knew it. Some things in life are so predictable. Like a lousy play. She had to humiliate herself. Not once does he mention her gift. Her art. What would his 'tortured' art be without La Duse? High-flown babble. He's a lunatic and worse, a scrounger. What she didn't spend, keeping him in cigars and caviar and furnished rooms with ocean views. And she's as stingy with money as anyone can be. But not with him, oh, no, not when it comes to D'Annuzio, the great playwright. I know what went on in those private rooms of his. One after the other. She, blind to it. Him, reeking of sex. Well, now it's over. He won't be back. He's found one with a title. Time will heal.

(Light down, then up on DUSE weeping bitterly in DESIREE's arms.)

Time will heal, precious.

(DESIREE takes DUSE's face in her hands.)

Look at me.

(DUSE looks up at DESIREE questioningly. DESIREE kisses her on the lips. DUSE responds, then sits back, taking in DESIREE's intense, passionate face and tightly closed eyes. She laughs and laughs.)

End of scene.

Scene

Desiree is dozing at her desk. Lights go down slowly, then come up on a dream world. Duse, dressed in something white and flowing, sits up on her chaise longue. She is MARGUERITE GAUTHIER, the tubercular courtesan-heroine of Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias*—one of Duse's most popular roles. She is coughing. Desiree enters, dressed as a man, so that at first, the audience might mistake her for one. She is Armand—Marguerite's young lover. The Dumas Scene from Act One is played for real.

ARMAND

I know that I am nothing to you, but if you would let me, Marguerite, I would take care of you like a brother. I would never leave you and I would cure you.

MARGUERITE

Why do you tell me this today?

ARMAND

I was afraid.

MARGUERITE

Afraid?

ARMAND

Afraid of the influence that you might have over my whole life.

MARGUERITE

You love me as much as that?

ARMAND

(seeing that she is laughing) If I were ever to tell you how much, it would not be today.

MARGUERITE

Never tell me. Go away at once, if what you say is true. Or else, love me as a friend, and in no other way.

ARMAND

Have you never been in love with anyone?

MARGUERITE

Never!

ARMAND

Thank God!

MARGUERITE

You're a strange boy!

ARMAND

*You are right to laugh at me, I am a fool. The only thing to do is to laugh at me . . .
Goodbye.*

MARGUERITE

Armand! Take this flower.

(She give him a camellia. ARMAND kisses it.) Bring it back to me.

ARMAND

When?

MARGUERITE

When it is faded.

ARMAND

How long will that take?

MARGUERITE

Just the little time that it takes for any flower to fade, a morning or an evening.

ARMAND

Oh, Marguerite!

MARGUERITE

Tell me again that you love me.

ARMAND

I love you.

MARGUERITE

And now go.

(DESIREE as ARMAND leaves, but not before coming back to kiss her hand once more, then leaves. DUSE remains alone. She coughs. Lights down and then up on DESIREE asleep at her desk.)

End of scene.

Scene

Duse is lying face down on her chaise longue. Desiree stands over her.

DESIREE

I won't allow this.

(DUSE moans in disgust.)

There's more truth in the fold of your arm than in most people's love-talk. You're honest, Eleonora. Just as real on stage as off. You're like music. As real as sound. My hand. As real as pain. You don't even paint your face. All the others do. What they cover up, you set free.

(DUSE moans.)

I could watch you all day. I'd stop anything to run to the theatre. To this day, it's like the first time. Look how the poets try to describe you!

DUSE

All shit poems.

DESIREE

You know what your problem is? You won't lie. I don't think you know how. That's what it is. People who lie to others and to themselves, especially. They're happy. They sleep easily.

(DUSE jumps up and edges to the door.)

DUSE

Shut up! What do you know about life? I don't want you near me. I don't have to listen to you. Tell me what *I* am! Just have to be alone. You like truth? Have some: I wish I didn't need you. God. You don't know how much I wish I didn't need you.

(In a flash, DUSE has slipped behind the bedroom door and locked it. Lights down, then up on DESIREE pacing in front of the closed door.)

DESIREE

(stopping) Turn the lock, Eleonora. Be a love.

(Silence. DESIREE leans her back heavily against the door, one ear cocked for sounds from within.)

Yet again! Again and again! It always falls to me. What do I have to do, eh? They're your company. Your children. They may be actors, but they're also human. Frankly, if you're not satisfied Eleonora. I must speak out. It's quite possibly your own doing. You terrify them. They lose their nerve. You're too critical by far. A volcano. As unpredictable as a force of nature. I suppose that's genius, I'm not blaming you, dearest. It's your sensitive nerves, I know. But the theatre takes all kinds. Great and petty alike. Well. I'll say this. You couldn't act without them. Could you? Besides what does it matter? It's you the crowds yearn for. Students. Critics. You're the greatest star of the twentieth century. Eleonora. Show some compassion.

DUSE

(grimly, from behind the door.) For whom?

DESIREE

Us mortals.

(There is a contemptuous laugh. Silence. Then DUSE begins to sing a very bawdy Italian folk song. This infuriates DESIREE. She turns and with her whole being pounds on the door with her fists, like a mad drummer. Lights down, then up. DESIREE is sitting on the floor, her back against the door, her legs spread out in front of her.)

You say I have the patience of an angel. But it's worn beyond repair. Eleonora. This time I'm leaving you.

(DESIREE gets up and loudly marches to the street door. She opens and closes it with a slam, remaining inside. She stares intently at DUSE's door which bursts open. DUSE, in a panic rushes toward the street. She stops when she sees DESIREE, who smiles widely. DUSE does the same.)

Come to the theatre, Eleonora.

DUSE

Promise me first.

DESIREE

Anything.

DUSE

It's the last time.

(DESIREE looks down.)

Promise me.

(DESIREE does not answer.)

Promise me.

(Silence)

(screaming) Promise.

DESIREE

I promise.

(DUSE heads toward the street door, triumphantly. She turns and stares at DESIREE to seal the pact. She smiles widely.)
End of scene.

Scene

DUSE stands alone. She speaks to an audience.

DUSE

Look. No sooner could I walk than I was placed on a stage and made to act. Like Jews. Gypsies. Nomads. There are wandering theatricals. A people onto themselves. It's fate. Not choice. So, you make the best of it. Going back, the Duse company had its proud moments. Recognition—even respect. By the time I came around, time had passed us by. We kept on. Barely. If we played, we ate. After eating, we played better. Many days I went hungry. So you see, I was hungry to perform. Sure to get a meal after. Like a donkey with its carrot. My hunger became my talent.

My passion was my mother. God rest her restless soul. Married into the family. Forced to take on female leads. She never had it in her. Poor little mama. I'm sure the theatre poisoned her. Crushing me to her, trembling so hard that I became her trembling, too. Vomiting an hour in the back before the dingy curtain rose. She collapsed on the stage when my breasts were still buttons. But *I* inherited her roles.

. . . To play at being woman. No idea what it was that I was playing. Liking the death scenes. That was my life. As my breasts grew tender and swelled, I learned about men and something like the passion I was forced to play and play and play became real. But I can't say whether or not my idea of what a woman was grew out of the parts I was made to act as a child.

I only know that the scenes began to blur. On stage, off. Listen. I got good. That endless suffering and dying made me money. Lots of it. More than enough for huge, fancy dinners I no longer had the stomach for. Enough capital to build my own Duse Company. Success enough to tour the world. To find the poet of the future. And to feed him. And it was the money that pleased me more than anything. Now: whatever I say goes. I must ask nothing of you. That's how I like it.

Little mother, why aren't you here with me now? On my hill. Surrounded by roses. Far from the dusty stages that made you gag. I will never play the part of a woman again. I'm going to live now and find out who *I* am. While there's still time.

Ladies and gentleman. I happily retire from the stage.

(She bows.)

End of scene.

TO READ THE WHOLE PLAY AND FOR ANY OTHER ENQUIRES, PLEASE
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