

The Secret Journals of Desiree von Wertheimstein

by

Lydia Stryk

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Characters.

Desiree von Wertheimstein

Eleonora Duse

Gabrielle D'Annunzio/ Lina Poleti/ Enrichetta Duse/ Friend of Duse

Voices of Stage Doorman/ The Press/ Husband of Enrichetta

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. There is irony in the fact that though Duse is the great actress it is Desiree's dramatics which are the source of entertainment ---for Duse as well as for the audience.

This drama is a work of fiction. But the details of Eleonora Duse's life, apart from the exact nature of the long relationship between her and her companion, Desiree von Wertheimstein, are based on recorded fact. That such a seminal relationship as the one between Duse and von Wertheimstein could go unexplored, written out of history, is the impulse behind this play. Almost nothing is known about von Wertheimstein. Later scholarship by Helen Sheehy informed my sense of the origin of their relationship. And I am very grateful for her generous encouragement to give primacy to artistic truth. But the fact remains that von Wertheimstein and her relationship with Duse remain a mystery. The press materials and quotes are real. The American actress Eva Le Gallienne's wonderful homage to Duse, *The Mystic in the Theatre*, in which von Wertheimstein is given serious and sympathetic attention, is the inspiration for this play.

SAMPLE 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. I said come back. But you've been waiting.

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 handkerchief.)

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 cruel of me. Stopped your tears, though.

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

So, why are you here? I haven't got a lot of time.

DESIREE

I wrote you a letter.

DUSE

(sighing) Do you see that pile over there?

(DUSE points to a heaping pile of letters and bouquets.)

DESIREE

No. It's here.

(She hands the letter to DUSE who opens it and reads it.)

I went to school with you daughter.

DUSE

Why didn't you say so? Connections are everything in the theatre.

(DESIREE shrugs.)

I *am* looking for someone. As it happens.

(DUSE peruses the letter again, takes DESIREE in, puts the letter down lightly.)

Are you friends with Enrichetta?

DESIREE

We do know each other, Madame Duse. But I'm older—

DUSE

--No matter. She won't be around.

Can you cook?

DESIREE

(sitting up, ready to be grilled) Why should I lie? No.

DUSE

Sew?

DESIREE

Not even a button.

DUSE

(intrigued and amused) A rich man's daughter.

(DUSE sits.)

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

DESIREE

Personally, I am very clean.

DUSE

Though you've never cleaned.

DESIREE

But I am compulsively clean when it comes to my body. I like a very hot bath. 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.

(a pause. DUSE takes her in.)

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. So earnest.

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!

DESIREE

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

DUSE

(sighing) Come spend the summer with me. In Italy. There's endless correspondence. As you can see.

(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.

DUSE

I breathe poorly. I'm not a party. (using her name for the first time) Desiree.

(DUSE looks at her.)

Heart's desire.

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.)

TO READ THE WHOLE PLAY AND FOR ANY OTHER INQUIRIES, PLEASE CONTACT info@lydiastryk.com.

