

THE LADIES OF THE CAMELLIAS

by Lillian Groag

6 men, 3 women

SYNOPSIS

An hilarious farce about an imagined meeting in Paris, 1897, between the famous theater divas Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse. The two actresses – who were the biggest and most temperamental stars of their day – were scheduled to perform back-to-back productions of the play *The Lady of the Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas. Duse's production will be performing in Bernhardt's theater, and the two women are in their own dressing rooms at the theater, though they have yet to meet.

The members of both acting companies expect huge fireworks between the two grand dames, and do what they can to avoid being in the way. Into this tense situation comes Ivan, a young Russian anarchist who threatens to blow up everyone in the theater — especially the two divas — unless his comrades are released from prison. Bernhardt and Duse must meet and greet each other for the first time as they are taken hostage by the armed Ivan, yet remain the ultimate theater professionals.

Ivan's ranting aside, the anarchist seems to know an awful lot about the theater, raising suspicions among the actors. Indeed, Ivan turns out to be a new breed of theater person, someone who the actors and playwright deride as useless and as a passing fad: a director. In a salute to the community of actors, Benoit Constant Coquelin, who is playing Cyrano de Bergerac, sneaks into the melee, and, in full costume, challenges Ivan to a duel. A rapier is no match for a gun and bomb, so it is theatrical dialogue they all must use to try and convince Ivan to let them go. When word arrives that the authorities will not trade the lives of even such famous actors for their prisoners, Sarah, feeling sorry for Ivan, offers to give him a letter of recommendation to a theater in a far-off country and show him how to escape through her secret passageway. As the other actors leave the stage, Bernhardt and Duse are left alone. They drop their facades and speak to each other as equals, for just a moment, before they return to glory before the crowds.

CHARACTERS

A GIRL, in early twenties. Small, fierce. NOT an ingenue, rather a young lead. French accent.

BENOIT, prompter and caretaker of the theater. 150 years old. French accent.

ALEXANDER DUMAS, FILS, author of *La Dame aux Camellias*, age 55-60. Elegant. Wry. French accent.

SARAH BERNHARDT, already ageless. Small, delicate, glamorous. Halo of Pre-Raphaelite reddish blond curls. French accent.

ELEONORA DUSE, the same, but somewhat younger. The curls are black. Italian accent. Grim.

FLAVIO ANDO, the Italian company's leading man. A past lover of Duse. Extremely handsome. A matinee idol and an excellent actor. Forties. Italian accent.

GUSTAVE-HIPPOLITE WORMS, of the unfortunate name. The French company's leading man. Handsome, witty, elegant, French. Also a good actor. Forties. French accent.

IVAN, a young Russian. Bright, articulate, passionate, sincere. Russian accent.

BENOIT CONSTANT COQUELIN, a great star. The original Cyrano. Ageless, like the other two. Big voice. French accent.

PLAYWRIGHT'S FOREWORD

In June 1897, Eleonora Duse arrived in Paris on her first French professional tour. On a fiercely competitive impulse (which makes Ms. Le Gallienne's touching claims to her "mysticism" wildly amusing), she chose a repertoire consisting of almost exactly the same roles that Sarah Bernhardt was famous for, not least *The Lady of the Camellias*, which both ladies used as their faithful "war-horse" all over Europe.

To add to the excitement of the occasion, there was some confusion as to where Duse would play, as, at the last minute, there seemed to be no theatres available. Whether this emergency was fortuitous or a carefully planned publicity stunt by their agent (yes, they had agents in those days!), a M. Schurmann, who represented both women, we will never know for certain. We do know that Bernhardt offered the Italian company her own Theatre de la Renaissance for their use, free of charge. Duse accepted, and the tension within and without the theatre can only be imagined, since the two were by now arch rivals in the minds of the theatre-going public and critics alike.

At the same time, the anarchist movement in Europe had flourished during the last decade of the 19th century, the precursor to terrorism as we, unfortunately, know it today. Several major political assassinations culminated with the murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Habsburg in Sarajevo in 1914, marking the beginning of World War I and the end of an era. The theatre was carefully watched by the authorities not so much to protect the performers, but in order to avoid incidents that might involve attending government officials. This play is not an attempt at history or biography – those are best represented by the printed word – but a "divertissement," a fancy, a theatre masque, a light-hearted, late-at-night chat about "what if," about something that might have happened in a world that expresses an alarmingly ebbing need for the theatre. The incident is pure fantasy; the circumstances, as well as the thoughts and ideas expressed by the ladies in question, are not. The ladies have been carefully researched through memoirs, diaries, letters, and reviews by their contemporaries. Bernhardt and Duse were among the last of the great actor-managers, and they were both star performers. Their names were household words around the world, in an era with no electronic media. This play is a salute to the centenary of a meeting that Robert de Montesquiou (Proust's Charlus and Sarah's Quiou-Quiou) described as "more of a collision than an embrace."