

An All-Female Cast Revitalizes The Worth of Women

Emily Hayes (October 27, 2018)



The evening of October 25, the Istituto Italiano di Cultura brought to Washington, DC a very relevant performance entitled *The Worth of Women*, based on a book originally written over 400 years ago in Venice.

Stark white cloth covered seven chairs set in a semi-circle around the stage. Front and center stood a small stand, which was also covered in white cloth. The audience anxiously chatted in anticipation of a rare, intimate performance at the Embassy of Italy. Normally, a bright screen would be pulled down or a panel for speakers squared along the edges of the stage, for a discussion of something abstract and intangible to the audience. The evening of October 25, the Istituto Italiano di Cultura brought to Washington, DC an all too real and relevant performance.

Voices emerged from the back of the small room, as if the women arising and speaking were audience members themselves. But as people turned to glance behind them, it was clear the voices were emanating from another era. Seven women in simple, floor-length dresses of various modest colors wound towards the stage. Their cheeks had a celestial glow as the distinct characters came alive around the room. Eyes glued on one another, they cast an invisible web of connection over the audience. Once they had reached their respective positions, they began to pound a beat in unison with their hands, crying out in song: “the heart that dwells within my breast is free, I belong to only me.”

These exact words were originally written over 400 years ago by **Modesta Pozzo**, under the pseudonym **Moderata Fonte**. A Venetian woman who was something of an anomaly, Pozzo was a married mother who produced literature in genres that were commonly considered “masculine” – the chivalric romance and the literary dialogue. As is not surprising for a woman writer of that time, her work was not well known during her lifetime, most likely due to the progressive and modern nature of her work. It was only after she died of childbirth in 1592 that her book **The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men** became popular in an ironic way.

In 1595, Italian writer **Giuseppe Passi** published his work **The Defects of Women**, which became such a sensation in Italy that other writers expanded on it with more nonsensical slanders against women. Pozzo’s *The Worth of Women* was published as a response and an alternative voice to the sexist dialogues that arose from *The Defects of Women*. In this book, Pozzo created a conversation among seven Venetian noblewomen. Their dialogue explored every aspect of women’s existence in both theoretical and practical terms, as mothers, wives, daughters, and lovers. As the play version of the book unfolded, it was clear many of Pozzo’s arguments could still inform discussions of gender equality today.

“Men boast about things that bring women shame... you have to consider that history is written by men... we are only subject to men the way we are subject to natural disasters, they are something you tolerate...” Each of the seven characters, differing in age and experience, took turns debating adultery, jealousy, sex, gender equality, and the responsibility of husbands, fathers, sons, and lovers with a striking contemporary accuracy. As they hurtled passionate statements and frequently refilled on wine, the scene on stage seemed more like any woman’s happy hour simultaneously happening across the city than an English translation of Renaissance vernacular literature.

Co-directors **Laura Caparrotti** and **Jay Stern** realized, after sifting through pages of the hefty text translated into English by **Virginia Cox**, that a re-contextualization and revitalizing of the vocabulary was not necessary. The quotes they drew and the lively council of characters they spun into a vibrant, witty play had women in the audience chuckling and nodding their heads fervently in agreement.

The unrestrained, enthralling performances of the actresses were testimonies to their talent as well as their dedication to the topic. It is no surprise, given that *The Worth of Women* is a production of the **Kairos Theater Company (KIT)**. The mission of this unique group is to create a cultural exchange program between Italy and the United States “to unveil the artistic and creative sides of each country.”



The cast did include a mix of Italian, American, and Italian-American women: **Carlotta Brentan, Tali Custer, Marta Mondelli, Caterina Nonis, Irene Turri, Annie Watkins**, and the co-director, Laura Caparrotti, who introduced all of them at the end.

Caparrotti was born in Rome and earned a degree in the Performing Arts from the Sapienza University. She has also studied independently with Dario Fo, Annie Girardot, and Elsa Wolliaston. In Italy she performed with Giancarlo Cobelli, Mario Carotenuto, and The Teatro Stabile di Torino. In addition to her impressive career as an actress and director, she is also a voice over artist, a teacher, and President and Artistic Director of KIT. As the mother of the youngest woman in the play, Caparrotti acts as judge in the debate and gives “wise council” on marriage to the fiery younger characters who have renounced it: “flatter them and spoil them, earn his trust, and at a certain point you can do what you like.”

Most importantly, she is a mentor for the young women in The Worth of Women production. Both on and off stage, their bond was apparent. Caparrotti beamed with pride as the women gathered together for a photo in the grand center of the Embassy, posing like Rosie the Riveter. Murmurs of “sono bravissime” echoed in the lobby.

“We began working on this project when the Women’s March was happening right outside our window. This was written 400 years ago and it is still so relevant,” Carlotta Brentan remarked after the show. Her spirited, rebellious rendition of a woman standing firm in her social and financial freedom from a male counterpart, alongside the commanding, satisfying declamations of Annie Watkins as Leonora, gave the audience an arsenal of valuable feminist arguments, and the words of Modesta Pozzo shone in a vivid light in their expressive eyes.

Marta Mondelli’s sparkling wit and at times deeply vulnerable performance as the married Lucrezia captivated the audience. She poses the question: “If men are so horrible, what is it about them that makes us love them so?” Her delivery arrested the other characters, and caught the audience in the same web of confusion, as Mondelli steered the momentum of emotion building in the Embassy in a new direction.

Their performances were so genuine, their characters so distinct and well conceived. Caterina Nonis and Tali Custer, the young, naïve bride and lover who are still optimistic about the idea of marriage, delivered a faultless candor of innocence as the audience witnessed their slow acceptance of the imprisoning reality for married women.

Irene Turri, in her elegant, contemplative portrayal of pregnant and disenchanted Cornelia made the evening all the more real and applicable when Caparrotti introduced the actresses, and revealed Turri was actually pregnant.

“This thing is fake,” Turri pulled slightly at the fake pregnancy bump strapped around her torso, “but there is a real one under here,” she gushed with happiness.



Perhaps just as moving were the two songs that bookended the play, and the theatrical song and dance about loving men halfway through. The lyrics to the songs were taken from poems by Pozzo, which were not included in the first English translation of *The Worth of Women* done by Virginia Cox, but were included in the newer translation, *The Merits of Women*. Erato Kremmida composed the music, and Maggie-Kate Coleman compiled the lyrics.

The women urge Leonora (Annie Watkins) to give an oration pleading men to answer the simple question of “why?”

“What possible cause do you have for not loving us?” she asks, for to love is to see another as equal, and as capable of the same talents and drive for ambition.

The women’s voices grew stronger with each address made directly to the audience, as they formed a row across the stage, a choir for equality.

One line in particular stands out, Watkins still addressing an audience of men: “We have made you judges in the case when you are one of the parties.”

In Washington, DC, always in the background, but more recently in the forefront, are the political and cultural events shaping our country. In the aftermath of the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, in the rise of the #MeToo movement, and as reproductive freedom for women is threatened, the cast of *The Worth of Women* proves: “The world cannot shine without women; woman is heart, and breath, and light, and men cannot live without women...”

The final lines of the play were raised in song, celebrated with stomps, and chanted freely. The all-female cast drew from the same fire that ignited Modesta Pozzo’s written words centuries ago to proclaim loudly in the capital of the United States: “the heart that dwells within my breast is free, I belong only to me.”

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