

TAMARA Articles

In 1988, Thom played the role of "Aldo Finzi" in *Tamara*.

BEING THERE'S ALL THE FUN IN DAZZLINGLY ORIGINAL 'TAMARA'

by William A. Raidy
(The Star-Ledger, December 4, 1987)

NEW YORK— "You don't just see 'Tamara,' you do it," advises the advertisement for what is also described as "the living movie." "So come prepared for wild, voyeuristic fun. Wear sensible shoes."

"Tamara," a unique collaboration of writer John Krizanc and director Richard Rose, which has been playing successfully on the West Coast for four years, is indeed wild AND voyeuristic fun. (And the suggestion about wearing sensible footwear is excellent advice.)

"Tamara" has now taken over the enormous fortress-like Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, transformed into II Vittoriale, the grandiose villa of Gabriele D'Annunzio, the Italian poet-patriot-Don Juan, where an evening complete with sex, politics, murder and philosophy...plus cocktails, champagne and an elaborate intermezzo buffet...takes place.

The evening is a curious and spirited one that seems almost a cross between one of those "Murder To Go" dinner shows, a Visconti film and some highly effective environmental theater.

I suppose "being there" is the most exciting part of "Tamara." After entering the great, heavy doors of the Park Avenue Armory, a liveried gentleman gives you the immediate illusion that it is indeed 1927 and that you are in the villa of the flamboyant Gabriele D'Annunzio, now under luxurious house arrest by his cautious admirer, Benito Mussolini.

"Bona sera," says the servant. "II Commandante is awaiting you." A gracious maid offers you a welcoming cocktail, and then things get sinister immediately. A black-shirted policeman, Capt. Aldo Finzi, issues you a "passport" and lays down the house rules. (Follow them, or you may lie murdered like one of the house guests.) Finzi, who we learn later is Jewish but convinced that Italian fascism will help his race, is "a gift from Mussolini, here to keep people out."

The host and legendary poet, war hero and lover ("People are always asking me to lead the way. Every year, a new cause, a new movement. This is my home,

my house of glass.") soon bids you welcome and the "house party" begins, as the guests await the arrival of the beautiful Polish-born painter, Tamara de Lempicka, who is to paint the great man's portrait. (His idea is to bed her down, as he has such dazzling women as Eleonora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt and Isadora Duncan.)

The action, based very loosely on diary entries of the villa's housekeeper, then takes place in more than a dozen rooms of the armory-villa on three floors, as well as on stairways and in hallways.

There are 10 diverse people in the villa, ranging from several of the owner's discarded mistresses to a mysterious new chauffeur, perhaps far too patrician-speaking for his lowly position. Watch him!

It is the audience's choice, then, to decide whom to follow as the plot thickens (and thicken it does!). One can slip into D'Annunzio's elegant bedroom, or down to the kitchen and overhear the intrigues of the domestics, or visit the oratorio, where a piano concert, and perhaps some delicate steps by the young ballerina, Carlotta Barra, who wants her host's recommendation to Diaghilev, are going on. Gian Francesco de Spiga will probably be playing. He is the spurned lover of one of the great one's former mistresses and up to no good, including slipping snorts of cocaine under the nose of the poet-hero. "Nothing is pure except this. And it is always faithful."

Often a half dozen or more scenes are going on through the rooms of the palazzo. And each spectator may choose the character he wishes to follow and learn more about. If you get bored with one, pop into another room. There's always some political or sexual intrigue brewing.

Despite the panoply of "Tamara," with members of the audience in hot pursuit of their chosen characters, the evening has things to say about life, and they're mostly cynical.

"Tamara," if you listen hard enough, is overloaded with would-be profundities and aphorisms, usually delivered by D'Annunzio: "There are some women who can say no to love. I've never met a woman who can say no to money"; "Dreams kill reality";

"A writer needs two things—solitude and beauty."

And as D'Annunzio, played with great panache in a resplendent white military uniform by Frederick Rolf, raves about the "new Italia," one can hear screams from one corner of the house and lilting music from another. "What am I missing elsewhere?"

is the inevitable question.

I suggest you might follow Tamara (well played by Sara Botsford) into her bedroom and listen to her soliloquy—she just wants to "paint the damn picture" and get away—and then pursue Mario the chauffeur (Jack Wetherall), who has some extraordinary secrets as he seduces the easily seduced maid, Emilia. Roma Downey, incidentally, in this role gives the best performance of the evening.

Everywhere something interesting is cooking, which makes "Tamara" exciting as well as great fun. My advice is: Don't try to figure out exactly what kind of an art form "Tamara" is, or isn't; just go and enjoy the excitement.

This pageant of passion, politics, love, art and mystery is both original and unique. And, oh yes, expensive. Evening performances are \$100, except Saturdays, when the tariff goes up \$25, and matinees are \$85. The excellent "intermezzo" dining is, however, included in the admission price.

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LAVISH COLD BUFFET IS SERVED DURING THE NEW PLAY "TAMARA"

by Jane Ellis
(The New York Post, December 2, 1987)

Dining out as a form of theater takes on a new dimension at "Tamara," the environmental work that opens tonight at the Seventh Regiment Armory.

For the audience, wining and dining is as much a part of enjoying the evening as running up and down stairs following the actors in an attempt to make sense of the attenuated plot of this Italian soap opera.

The nightly supper, a 45-minute intermezzo, is indeed, for many, the most satisfying part of the evening. A lavish cold buffet—devised by the four star restaurant Le Cirque—is washed down with lashings of Perrier Jouet Grand Brut Champagne.

"Because it is the story of an Italian (the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio's life under house arrest by Mussolini in the turbulent 20s), I agreed to do it," said Le Cirque owner Sirio Maccioni, whose chef Daniel Boulud worked on the menu with caterer Dounia Rathbone of Remember Basil.

Le Cirque has contributed its star dessert—Creme Brulee, which is made daily at the Armory by a chef from the restaurant and served in little

individual glass dishes at the close of the show along with coffee and, where needed, a little plot unraveling by the cast.

Another Le Cirque contribution is the delectable curried chicken salad that forms part of the elegant cold buffet.

For the Remember Basil catering staff, it's a chance to be part of real theater, for as we all know, inside every natty waiter is a thespian dying to emerge.

For "Tamara," the staff had a dialect coach to refine the pronunciation of key words like grazie and prego. It all adds to enjoying the flavor of life in an elegant Italian villa.

"They're all developing their own personas," said Remember Basil's John Wiat.

"The serving wenches," as the maids in fetching uniforms are called, busboys and chefs work in unison to set up the dining room buffet in double quick time. In just six minutes, in fact, an elaborate still life is created with garlanded Italian busts, festoons of branches and flowers, baskets of lacquered breads, vibrant vegetables and cheeses together with the garnished platters.

There's a final misting of water for that dewy look, and then the doors are rolled open for service.

The evening's hospitality, however, starts the moment one enters the Armory's baronial hall. Serving wenches dispense trays of Tamara cocktails, a deceptively benign-tasting blend of vodka, cranberry juice and pear schnapps.

As the audience gathers for the start of the multithread play, champagne is served and caponato spread on grilled baguette slices.

The audience, who, at a Sunday matinee, attacked the buffet with gusto, voted the intermezzo "marvelous." Remarks included "stands up to Le Cirque's reputation," "delicious," "can you imagine a filet so tender you can cut it with a fork."

The menu was devised to be satisfying but not heavy. "You don't want to serve food that will tucker them out," explained production stage manager Bruce Kagel.

Roast filet of prime beef is served with green peppercorn sauce. Curried chicken salad is flavored with raisins and apples, Italian green beans are tossed with roasted red peppers and almonds, pasta primavera combines fusilli with snow peas, mushrooms, tomatoes and peas. There are a tossed green salad and

hunks of genoa salami and crudites.

Dounia Rathbone, who created a kitchen on the main floor of the Armory, said that during previews, the menu, like the show itself, has changed somewhat in scope.

"In the beginning, we served a variety of antipasto," she recalled. But this created logistical problems as the service was too slow.

"We've changed to heartier food, fewer items but tastier and more expensive ones.

"We realized we had to satisfy New Yorkers who were paying a lot for their tickets (\$90 to \$135), and we wanted to give them their money's worth."