

Dramturg's Note

The Countess

"...go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth."

--John Ruskin (1819-1900)

This oft-quoted championing of "truth" can be found in the first volume of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843). At that time, critical success in British painting was largely determined by the Royal Academy of Art, whose criterion for quality work was still dominated by the opinions established by its founding president, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). A painter in his own right, Reynolds subscribed to a tradition of painting stretching back to Titian (1485-1576) and other artists of the High Renaissance – a tradition that placed a premium on attaining a "general truth" in painting.

Throughout the early 19th century, however, European avant-garde artists, influenced by Romantic thought, had begun to shift their aesthetic focus from the "general" to the "particular." They looked to nature as their guide. J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) was a British painter on the forefront of this movement. By the 1830s, critics had turned on Turner's work when it began to show a particular naturalistic concern for light and atmospheric effects, moving away from the "general truth" demanded by the academy. In 1843, John Ruskin, a twenty-four year old recent Oxford graduate, used *Modern Painters* as a platform on which to defend the work of Turner, whom he believed to be one of the greatest painters in the history of Western art. Ruskin's evocative and poetic writing on art in this book and subsequent works, quickly brought him success as an art critic, in this age where illustrative reproduction and access to well-stocked museums was limited.

Just a few years later, in 1848, three wildly talented students attending the Royal Academy of Art found themselves frustrated by the academy's narrow criterion for quality work. Searching for another way, they were moved by the uncomplicated and unadorned forthrightness in the work of 14th and 15th century Italian painters, such as Raphael (1483-1520). The problem from their perspective was that artists of the High Renaissance, those who followed Raphael (or Raphaelites), unjustly codified his natural impulses into an academic rule which still continued to dominate British art criticism in the 19th century. Their solution was to break with centuries-old tradition by forming the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The three young men, all under the age of twenty-five at the time, were: Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), and John Everett Millais (1829-1896).

Their mission translated into rich works painted with an extremely-detailed realism, an adherence to naturalistic lighting & atmospheric conditions, and brilliant colors. Harkening back to the 14th and 15th century Italian works which inspired them, their subjects were often of medieval or biblical figures, and steeped in poetic symbolism. The reactions to their work created quite a stir in the London art scene. Writing in his own literary

magazine on Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850), Charles Dickens blasted Millais for creating such a wretched depiction of the Holy Family. He wrote that Millais' Mary is "...so hideous in her ugliness that...she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England."

John Ruskin took note of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and saw Millais as a potential heir to his beloved Turner. In 1851, wrote a series of articles for *The Times* in which he defended Millais and the Brotherhood's work. The resulting controversy between Ruskin and Dickens created enough buzz throughout London so that the Brotherhood painters were never without patrons thereafter.

The Brotherhood owed a great deal to Ruskin – not just for his championing of their work, but also in part for the inspiration which *Modern Painters* provided them. "Go to nature," they did. To achieve the level of detail evident in their landscape work, they sometimes spent weeks outdoors studying and painting. Ruskin also heeded his own advice. An amateur artist and geologist as well as an art critic, he took lengthy trips to the continent to study the landscape. He and his wife Effie spent most of 1852 in Venice, where he studied the medieval gothic architecture of the city for his three volume series titled *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853).

Ruskin was invited to present a series of lectures at the Philosophical Institution in Edinburgh, Scotland in November of 1853. To give himself time to prepare the lectures, he arranged a summer holiday in the Scottish Highlands with his wife Effie, a Scottish native herself. He also invited Millais, seeing it as an opportunity to mentor the young painter who had agreed to paint his portrait. The party left on June 21st, 1853 which is where our play begins.

Although Gregory Murphy's play *The Countess* depicts these two great Victorian men, the play is actually Effie's story. Euphemia Gray (1828-1897), was born in Perth, Scotland – the same town where John Ruskin's father had lived. The Ruskin and Gray families knew each other quite well; so much so, that as a school girl Effie often stayed with the Ruskins in London during the summer months when she was en route to her boarding school in Stratford-upon-Avon. She grew into an intelligent woman, who spoke three languages, and could dance, sing, and play the piano beautifully. She and John married in 1848 at her parent's house in Scotland, and thus began their complex and troubled relationship.

Both the playwright and our production team did extensive research on the Ruskin family, Millais, and the Victorian Age in which they lived. We have read through their letters, published writing, and have studied the sketches, paintings, and photographs they have left behind. Yet, the creation of a play, much like a painting, however life-like it may seem, always requires a degree of interpretation. No one can claim to know with certainty how the events of John & Effie's marriage unfolded, but like Millais and the Pre-Raphaelite ideals he stood for, we constantly strive for "truth."