



# Vera; or, The Nihilists: The Italian Premiere

BY ROB MARLAND

In June 2021 students at the University of Eastern Piedmont in Vercelli staged *Love and Revolution*, a new play freely adapted from Oscar Wilde's *Vera; or, The Nihilists* by Professor of English Marco Pustianaz and the TiLLiT English group. Their choice was certainly unconventional. Most dramatic companies with an interest in Wilde opt to revive one of his society comedies or his farce, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In contrast, Wilde's first play, a tragedy of passion and politics set in Russia, has been almost completely ignored since it flopped in New York in 1883. Wilde was present for the opening night and would later describe the experience as 'the sharpest agony of my life'.<sup>[1]</sup> The audience heckled the climactic love scene and, when Wilde shuffled onto the stage to give a nervous speech, they laughed in his face. The next morning the author woke to a barrage of excoriating reviews. The *New York Tribune* branded the dialogue 'bantam gabble'; 'long-drawn dramatic rot' was the verdict of the *Inter-Ocean*.<sup>[2]</sup> The play closed after a week and Wilde returned to the lecture circuit, his dreams of theatrical success dashed, albeit temporarily.

Students at Durham University appear to have been the first to revive *Vera*. Their production was a modest affair for what amounted to the British premiere of Wilde's debut dramatic effort. The audience was crammed into a tiny room within a few feet of the actors. There wasn't even a raised stage. However, the performance was well-received, perhaps because the play could

finally be appreciated for what it was: a piece of juvenilia that nevertheless contained 'sparks of Wildean wit' that would later 'burn very brightly' in the comedies.<sup>[3]</sup> Audiences in New York would have to wait until 2014 for another chance to see *Vera*. Wilde cannot have intended for his play to be read as an indictment of the political oppression of the LGBT community, but the Femme Fatale Theater company added the subtext by casting Chris Tyler, a male drag performer, in the lead role. One of the commonest criticisms of the original production was that there was only one female part. Now there were none.

The most recent staging of *Vera*, in Vercelli, radically re-imagined the play as a feminist parable. An all-female gang of Nihilists rebelled against the patriarchy, evoking those more modern Russian protesters, the punk rock group Pussy Riot. The morning after the 1883 premiere Wilde had admitted that his play was too long and promised reporters that he would cut it down 'as much as possible without destroying the sense of the representation or impairing its worth'.<sup>[4]</sup> As it transpired, he could only bring himself to

#### Info from [robmarland.co.uk](http://robmarland.co.uk)

Rob Marland made the first ever graphic novel about Oscar Wilde, makes a movie review podcast, and records audiobooks. Marland is currently working on a graphic novel about Wilde's visit to Greece, called *Really Greek*, and a complete collection of Wilde's interviews.



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eliminate fifteen minutes of material, leaving the runtime still in the region of three and a half hours. Pustianaz and his students were much more ruthless (and sensible), hacking the play down to a lean fifty minutes. Amazingly, the plot remained intact: the play's worth was not impaired but improved. The TiLLiT production also answered a question posed by the reviewers in New York almost 140 years earlier: after Vera stabs herself in the final scene, what happens to her lover—the new Czar—and the country he was born to rule? A new epilogue, set a year after the events of the play proper, found the Nihilists and the Czar combining forces to usher in a 'New Republic'. It was a more hopeful ending, better suited to a time when, due to the pandemic, hope has often seemed in short supply.

But one question remains: was the University of Eastern Piedmont's version of *Vera* the play's first outing in Italy? When reading Matthew Sturgis's biography *Oscar: A Life* I was surprised to learn that '[t]here had – extraordinarily – been a production of *Vera* at the Teatro Diana in Milan in 1890, which

closed after three performances'.<sup>[5]</sup> If true, this would indeed be extraordinary. It would constitute the first performance of any of Wilde's plays not just in Italy but anywhere in Europe, predating the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in London by two years. Sturgis's source is Rita Severi's article in Stefano Evangelista's *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*.<sup>[6]</sup> Severi's source, in turn, is Massimo D'Amico's *Tutte le Opere*.<sup>[7]</sup> D'Amico provides further details: the play had been staged by actor/managers Andrea Maggi and Clara della Guardia and, after it had proved a failure, it was replaced with a revival of *The Fossils* by François de Curel.

This cannot be right, though, because *The Fossils* was produced for the first time at Paris's Théâtre Libre on 29 November 1892. It proved a dud, and was not revived until 21 May 1900 in a production of a revised script at the Odéon Theatre, when it finally 'achieved considerable success'.<sup>[8]</sup> It therefore seems likely that the date of 1890 given by D'Amico, and repeated by Severi and Sturgis, is incorrect. If the play was staged at some later time the last possible date would be May 1910,



Alessia Raneri as Vera in the 2021 University of Eastern Piedmont production of *Love and Revolution*.

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Video presentazione:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=GscWNP9slpw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GscWNP9slpw)

Le produzioni TiLLiT 2021 sono disponibili su YouTube.



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when Maggi died. I searched the archives of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* but failed to find evidence that *Vera* was staged at any time in Milan. Maggi and della Guardia did produce *The Fossils* and several other plays in their repertoire at Milan's Teatro Manzoni between September and October 1900, but I discovered no trace of *Vera*.

Also arguing against a production dating to 1890 is the absence of any surviving letters by Wilde on the subject, and the fact that it would have been difficult for Maggi and della Guardia to obtain a copy of the text before Leonard Smithers published his pirated edition in 1902. Even then, Smithers printed just 200 copies;[9] it was only with the 1908



Clara Della Guardia, photographed by Giovanni Battista Sciotto. Author's collection.

*Collected Edition* of Wilde's works edited by Robert Ross that the script achieved a wide circulation. D'Amico's claim is surely based on a report of a genuine performance—whether or not it was of *Vera*—and further research is warranted. I am currently working on a book about the writing and staging of Wilde's first play, and I invite members of the Italian Oscar Wilde Society who may have more information about *Vera* in Italy (or who have advice about the best places to search) to get in touch.

[1] 'Oscar Wilde's Views', *The Morning News* (Paris, France), 20 June 1884, 1.

[2] 'The Drama', *New York Tribune*, 21 August 1883, 5; 'A Wilde Drama', *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), 21 August 1883, 7.

[3] [B. D'Arcy], 'Vera', *Palatinate* (Durham, UK), 10 February, 1856, 6.

[4] 'Oscar Wilde on 'Vera'', *The Evening Telegram* (New York, NY), 21 August, 1883, 4th ed., 1.

[5] Sturgis, M. (2018). *Oscar: A Life*. London: Head of Zeus. 657.

[6] Severi, R. "Astonishing in my Italian": Oscar Wilde's first Italian editions', in Evangelista, S. (Ed.). (2010). *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 109.

[7] Wilde, O. (1994). *Tutte le Opere*. D'Amico, M. (Ed.). Rome: Newton-Compton. 283.

[8] Clark, B. H. (1914). *Four Plays of the Free Theater*. Stewart & Kidd Company, xxix, 1.

[9] Mason, S. (1914). *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*. London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd. 551.