A Gift for Eleonora

By Alison Oddey

Verso Page

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Introduction

A Gift for Eleonora is a devised and scripted performance by Alison Oddey. Alison has been a leading international researcher, performer and academic specializing in creating works through a number of methods and she has written the seminal text Devising Theatre (Routledge).

Over many years she has worked with her colleague Chris White, on books, journals, exhibitions and design projects. They have worked together to develop the performance of A Gift for Eleonora. Their ethos for the work is to perform in sites where there is a link to health and well-being, where the Arts in general can contribute to different communities, their relationship to health and wellbeing and approaches to self-care. The work that they produce presents audiences and viewers with Art works which raise consciousness, create questions about what we mean by health and help demonstrate the cultural value of the Arts.

This publication offers a background to the research, the site of the Roman Baths and offers a copy of the script and short essays on the context of making the performance both here and previously at the Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, Italy in 2015.

Eleonora has a website with further images and information http://eleonoradetoledo.com

If you would like to perform the script please request permissions from eleonorapress2016@gmail.com

The Company

Alison Oddey – Writer, Performer, Director

Chris White – Designer, Performer, Director, Production, Film Director

Tim Heywood – Costume Designer

Alison Lane – Costume Maker

Nick Sorensen – Musician, Composer

With thanks to Cristina Aschengreen Piacenti, Fausto Calderai, Angela Caputi, Donna Giorgiana Corsini, Elio Di Franco, Tiziana Frescobaldi, Linda Loppa, Anna Luppi, Letizia Renzini, Aurora Fiorentini, Sandra Porter.

The Roman Baths, Bath Literature Festival, Bath Spa Live, Polimoda, University of Derby, Nottingham Trent University, Bath Spa University.

A Gift for Eleonora by Alison Oddey

Characters

Eleonora De Toledo, 1st Duchess of Florence

Isabella Figuerosa, Lady in waiting

Mastro Agostino, The Tailor

Tullia d’Aragona, The Courtesan and Poet

Andrea Pasquali, The Doctor

Court Musician, The Saxophonist

First performed at the Basilica of Santa Croce Florence in the Capella dei Pazzi, May 2015.

This version performed at the Roman Baths, Bath 3rd March 2016 as part of the Bath Literature Festival.

The text is underscored by a soprano saxophone which acts as a voice to highlight aspects of Eleonora’s health, wellbeing and happiness.

The Court Musician enters and starts playing music. Eleonora enters from the Great Bath entrance of the Roman Baths into the night-time, torch-lit space, moving regally in full costume to the centre of the space, the Roof Spine Fragment and Brick Arch behind her. Her Lady-in-Waiting, Isabella performs the ritual to the Goddess Sulis Minerva at the Sacred Spring of the Baths, pouring Spring water for Eleonora to drink, and then placing the ‘Curse’/Prayer from Eleonora to the Goddess of Healing in the bowl of Spring water. Once complete, the Court Musician finishes playing. Eleonora faces the audience:

I was originally described to my husband, Cosimo de’Medici as, beautiful, fresh, with a rosy complexion…with a graceful gait, reverential stance, a sweet voice, full of intelligence, a clear face, an angelic gaze. Cosimo sought my happiness and health as much as his own. As a child, I suffered from a mild form of rickets, which I was told was the consequence of not being weaned until I was two. My flacid and languid legs became curved as a result of trying to walk on abnormally soft bones.

Aged seventeen, on the eve of Cosimo’s twentieth birthday, I came to my new life here in Florence, an economically depressed city. My future mother-in-law sent me fifty precious pearls and a pendant to Naples, where my father was Viceroy - appointed by Charles V of Spain, telling me that I would receive another 150 pearls when I came to Florence. I had seventeen years’ experience of Royal Court protocol and manners, having re-located to Italy, and a dowry of 80,000 gold scudi. My husband-to-be’s mother advised Cosimo to prepare a lavish, expensive welcome party for his new bride with ephemeral trappings, silk hangings, temporary arches and giant papier mâché statues.

…Nine months later, I had my first child.

Cosimo wrote to my mother: ‘I can only imagine how deeply your Excellency must feel on the departure of the Signora Duchessa, for such is consonant with the love of a mother. Yet, since this is a woman’s destiny, that they do not stay in those houses in which they are born, nor with those who gave them birth, I am sure your Excellency will set against your grief the Signora’s happiness and well-being.’

My mother died just months after I married him…(Music)

(Bright tone) We were so in love with one another, never without the other. I was constantly by Cosimo’s side and I always told him my thoughts in person. (Eleonora listens to the music until it finishes)

I liked risk. My passions were gambling and hunting. But, our greatest common interest was our family.

I gave birth eleven times. Eight of my children survived. I was known as ‘La Fecunda’, the most fertile one. We named our first child, Maria, after the first name of both our mothers. Cosimo decided that my health should be put in the care of his mother, Maria Salviati, rather than my Spanish ladies.

When my mother-in-law was forty-two, the court doctors told Cosimo that his mother was experiencing bouts of rectal bleeding.

One, Doctor Andrea Pasquali, told him that Maria would sooner die than show anybody. (Proudly, as she moves to address the audience) In that same year, a son, Francesco, Il Principe, a legitimate male heir was born.

Then, at twenty-one, I found myself pregnant with my third child. I suddenly began to vomit in such a great fashion, or should I say in such a quantity, that I seemed to flood half the room. A Florentine cleric, said that it was a sign that I would bear a male child, declaring that only a baby boy could have such control over a mother’s body and cause such violent illness. I experienced such severe morning sickness. Such was my conviction that I would have another boy that I made an enormous bet with a merchant, Niccolo Puccini, that if I had a boy, he was to supply me with, a piece of cloth of silver of 152 braccie (about 88 metres), and that if I had a girl, I would pay him 780 scudi. I had a daughter. We called her Isabella, after my sister; Isabella Romolo, after the Patron Saint of Fiesole.

BUT – 5 months before Isabella’s birth, Cosimo’s first child, his illegitimate daughter, Bia, died, aged six years old. Cosimo’s mother adored Bia; she felt that Bia was the comfort of our court, being so very affectionate. Maria was known as Nonna, grandmother to four of our children. I loved Bia, too. Bronzino, Cosimo’s chief portraitist painted her after she died…her white complexion…her reddish-blonde hair… My husband was congratulated on the beautiful baby girl God had conceded to him in recompense for the one he had taken to join him in paradise.

Cosimo loved Isabella Romolo like no other child, more than our first daughter, Maria. When Isabella was only forty days old, she fell very sick. My mother-in-law wrote to me from our chief residence, the Villa Castello, just outside Florence, and Cosimo’s father, Giovanni’s childhood home.

(Messenger bring a letter - Eleonora signs for it)

‘The Lady Isabella has been coughing up black phlegm. I blame the passage of the moon, but last night we watched her carefully and I have not lost hope. She coughed up a great deal, but this morning seems much improved.’ (As an aside) Letter writing is a practice that I detest and distrust. But, a few days later, the black phlegm returned again and Maria now blamed the wet nurse, for eating the wrong things, so that the excessive feeding of Isabella from the wet nurse’s breast caused her sickness.

My poor Isabella suffered such a mixture of symptoms. One moment my daughter had coughing fits, shivers, then she recovers, then her flesh grows livid, in such a way that it renders one compassionate to see her. Like all children, she had periods of fractiousness and teething troubles. Once, when the stomach remedies appeared to make no difference, her doctor concluded that he couldn’t find a fever, but that her stools and her teeth showed the effects of the pain of worms. Her restlessness was the result of the condition of her bocchina (she indicates little mouth/anus to the audience), so he gave her a draught of couch grass and unicorn horn, such was the fashion then. An apothecary’s cabinet must contain the tusk of a rhinoceros, elephant or narwhal ground up into a powder and served as a drink. It was an expensive and precious cure-all that we could afford.

Our team of doctors was always available to take note of Isabella’s symptoms and to proffer remedies. She was always being purged and bled to restore the balance of her body’s humours, a way of life for us Florentine elite. (Lady in Waiting gives her drops of Rescue Remedy)

At Castello, Cosimo ordered many of the exotic plants arriving from the New World to be planted. (Lady in Waiting gives her the opera glasses). At the bottom of the garden was a field of maize, or Indian Corn, as it was known, whose tall green shoots and enormous ears of corn were vastly different to any crop planted in Italy. I was always the shrewd agricultural investor, the businesswoman always interested in money, in the sale of crops. I traded in grain, which I shipped as far as Spain. As a true Spanish woman, I liked to adorn myself in great luxury, so my immense land holdings had to provide… (she takes out a poker hand of cards) I took an interest in mining, beekeeping, raising silkworms, and in order to cover my gambling or betting losses, (She puts cards back into pocket), I had to manage my Tuscan estates profitably.

Thirteen months, after Isabella, I had Giovanni, named after Cosimo’s father. (Thoughtfully) I always felt that my mother-in-law, Maria overreacted to potential dangers with the children. Maybe, I was never maternally anxious…I tended to put Medici public relations first. Maria, died at Castello, and was taken to the Church of San Lorenzo, here in the city, to join the other dead Medici in the family tomb.

I was twenty-three when Lucrezia was born. After this, only three of the six children I gave birth to survived infanthood – Garzia, Ferdinando and Pietro. It was always the Secretaries, who told us of their concerns for the children, ‘The children are very well, except that worms are causing Don Garzia some trouble, (she starts running in a circle, becoming Garzia, being a child), who this morning started yelling, “Worms, worms!” and two or three dropped out’.

I was always attentive to my children’s health and wellbeing.

Cosimo believed in the importance of the closeness of the family, eating with them at the table, when all of them were seven or under. When we moved to Palazzo Vecchio, I believed that the city air was bad for the children. Cosimo told my father that I was healthy and happy. I was certainly happy with the loggia, the Terrazzo della Duchessa, which was connected via a spiral staircase all the way down to Cosimo’s apartments, which meant that all the family could take fresh air conveniently and away from the prying eyes of the public. Those views of Florence…from the window, I could see the tall Tuscan Gothic façade of the Church, the Basilica di Santa Croce…I began to understand this city of materials…wool, linen, silk, velvet, leather and fur.

I was careful, too, in what I ordered for the children’s clothing. I loved fabrics of gold and silver cloths, damask, brocade, cut velvets - almost as much as I loved gambling. At my children’s christenings, I wrapped them in robes made of gold gauze with gold trim, and swaddling bands of gold patterned tabby, lined in red damask. At Garzia’s christening, I was dressed in the Spanish style in a beautiful zimarra in silver gauze decorated with fringes and pearls, with a matching petticoat in white velvet and a plumed beret. I loved the gold and silver gauzes or buratto, especially for veils for the head and for hairdressing; those different qualities of weave, rete and retino, that is, network or mesh fashion accessories. My eldest, Maria, wore a dress in the same silver cloth as me with a few jewels in her hair. I found a length of white mucajarro, a mock-velvet made from wool to make a dress with a train for Isabellica. The girls’ hair would be front braided to keep it off their faces, and gathered at the back into a scuffia, a net. In the city, I was modest, had decorum, showed piety. Florentines perceived me as the public consort of the Duke, excessively Spanish, excessively noble and excessively pious, reducing Palazzo Vecchio to a convent. (Music and Eleonora takes out a prayer book from her coat pocket.)

If I had to have a favourite child, I suppose it would be Giovanni…or Garzia. Giovanni looked like an angel from heaven. Maybe not a favourite, but I felt closest to him. (She puts the prayer book back and finds the material samples.) I recall that when some samples of black velvet and gold brocade, that required at least six different weaving processes, were sent to me before he was born, that my agent purchased 46 braccie of that fabric, of which, I kept 10 for the dress that I eventually wore for Bronzino’s portrait with my beaming two year old son. I sent 36 to my sister in Galicia, to my relatives in Spain and to my ladies at court in Naples. That velvet brocade was a diplomatic tool, a gift that was a political statement, as seen in my portrait, which Cosimo sent as replica gifts to important people in Europe and as tokens of his own happiness. I had an altar cloth made from some of that fabric, and dedicated to a Church. I often said to my tailor, Mastro Agostino, “Fashion clothing as you see fit”, so when ermine furs arrived from Rome, he lined the inside of that dress’s sleeves..., and my particular pleasure was with two pairs of red velvet shoes with black velvet laces that were sent, to which, in front of everyone at Court, Cosimo said, “They look to me like the shoes worn by Popes.” However, I had my revenge when some months later, after Cosimo experienced a chronic case of diarrhoea, which led him to design and commission a special pair of breeches that attached to his vest with garters for quick exits…they were far more difficult to unhook than he had anticipated! (She laughs with Agostino.)

Giovanni was always very happy, and from whom any anger quickly came and went, always laughing and singing, the reverse of his older brother, Francesco - sullen, cerebral, brooding…When Francesco was six, he was always pensive, with a strong propensity towards melancholy, and later as a teenager, developing his lifelong passion for alchemy, for chemical investigations, where he tried to turn base metal into gold. Giovanni adored Francesco, always wanting matching clothes like he had…the charm of Giovanni…when he was six, I asked my confessor, whether we should have little Don Giovanni made a cardinal? I posed for individual portraits with each of my three eldest sons, but never with my daughters. It was my sons, who earned me my reputation as ‘La Fecundissima’. The relationship of fertility and happiness was an established scientific principle, and Florentine women were confined to their dark homes, leaving only to go to Church or to visit their families.

We had only a needle and thread to occupy our mind, (she picks up her embroidery) putting us at risk to psychological disturbances, according to the doctors. If I was denied something that I craved, the agonising privation that I would suffer as a result, the sense of loneliness or anxiety during a pregnancy would disturb my menstrual blood, damaging the foetus that I carried, leading to stillbirths…(wistfully), to children who didn’t live a year…Anna…Antonio…(Nostalgic tone) Nine months before Giovanni was born, I spent the day at the seashore…the next day horseback riding the beach with the Duke to a spot where we fished together…I took to the hedonistic country lifestyle…I enjoyed tennis matches, with my husband…, felt such joy just being in the wild of the Tuscan hinterland, …spending long hours engrossed in poker games with his closest male companions, whilst he indulged in his passion for mineralogy, (she gets out from her pocket a collection of turquoise stones) polishing turquoise stones with his jeweller. (Music)

Then, the stifling, restrained effect of confinement, defining my residence in Florence, so - I bought the Palazzo Pitti, which was more of a country villa than an urban residence.

Here, our Medici gardeners planted orange and lemon trees, vines of muscatel grapes…we augmented the orchards…we had baskets of peaches, plums, pears, apples and figs. Rounded fruits that looked like the sphere-shaped packages of medicine sold at the time. (she holds up some fruits offered her by the Lady in Waiting who then offers them to the audience) I wanted to give the children a varied diet; we ate trout and asparagus from Milan in April, figs in June, almonds and olives from my father; Spanish salted cod in September, and boar, truffles and goat’s cheese in December. Our dining service followed Spanish protocol – formal, with courtiers never showing any familiarity, and only the accessibility that I permitted. We didn’t eat vegetables that were cold, on account of them causing negative emotions in the body. We drank water from the spa at Montecatini. We enjoyed an antipasto of stuffed Damascene prunes, a salad of rosemary flowers, red lentil soup, salted eel in white almond sauce, snails in green sauce, and artichoke pasties. At Christmas and New Year, I would purchase treats for all of the children, such as fruit and animals made out of sugar, as well as little animals – animaletti - made from glass.

I was never concerned with the children’s intellectual education, particularly…until perhaps the poetess and courtesan Tullia d’Aragona arrived in Florence. (She acknowledges her across the bath) She won the patronage of both Cosimo and I, dedicating sonnets and books of poetry to both of us. Music was an integral part of our life at the Medici court; our passion being for the madrigal, with parts for as many as five voices, creating the opportunity for self and collective expression. (Music) Madrigals told stories, made more evocative by being set to music. Music induces in us various passions, in a way that it has always done, but reciting some beautiful, learned and elegant poetry to the sound of some instrument, we are even more greatly moved, such as to laugh, cry, or other similar things.

I had frequent pulmonary ailments. Aged twenty-seven, my doctor said that I had lost weight and colour, and advised me to avoid leading an active life, riding and hunting. These court physicians disapproved of my lifestyle, and said that this, combined with an immoderate diet, had led to my poor health. (She sees Pasquali) Pasquali told me that I was possibly affected by a form of respiratory tuberculosis; that I was chronically wasting away due to consumption. It was true that I did constantly suffer from stomach problems, recurrent vomiting and a persistent cough. He had treated me with the Holywood cure, which employed lignum sanctum, a New World resin used to treat syphilis, also taken as a cure for gastro-intestinal disease. (Pasquali looks over his glasses) I had spent a month in a special room at high temperatures, eating lightly, undergoing purges and taking this concoction prepared under his supervision. However, despite the cure, Pasquali saw me vomiting every morning after breakfast.

I had two very hard steel bodices made for me by a cuirassier in February 1550. This metallic bodice, covered in soft textile materials to make it more comfortable, supported the weakness caused by the first signs of this pulmonary disease, and gave me an alibi (she changes her earrings) for not giving up what I wanted to do; participate in my husband’s dynamic life and be an independent woman. (she touches up her lipstick) I enjoyed travelling on horseback, hunting and fishing. In the March, my health was slightly better with the milder weather. I had some ailments after this, digestive problems. A year later, the court physician, Pagni, said that I was exhausted and consumed with illness and within three weeks, my health further worsened. In April, I moved to Pisa, where I experienced a daily cycle of increased illness and then improvement. I felt severely distressed; I didn’t rest, I followed Cosimo on all of his travels.

When our first daughter, Maria, died, aged seventeen, Cosimo said that she was of the same disposition as himself, and that she was deprived of fresh air. She was betrothed to Alfonso d’Este of Ferrara, but it was Lucrezia, aged twelve, who married him in the Chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, …accompanied by the most exquisite music, and all night long…dancing…and other pleasing entertainments. Cosimo commissioned songs and poems to celebrate Isabella’s marriage to Paolo Giordano Orsini, authorising the purchase of almost thirteen metres of white damask, taffeta, velvet and satin for her wedding gown. (Eleonora listens to music, and continues speaking)

I remember Isabella sitting in Bronzino’s studio for her nuptial portrait, wearing her high-necked camiciotto, worn since childhood, and a slashed dark velvet over-gown, the sleeves embellished with pearls…a pearl necklace and girdle threaded with jewels fashioned in the shape of Orsini roses, indicating that she now united two houses, ….a business transaction designed to benefit both families. I can see her now wearing the zibellino, an ermine or marten fur, long associated with childbirth, a bejewelled pelt popular accessory for brides as talismanic fertility aids. I owned at least four…Isabella became pregnant in the April…I remember how Giovanni, a Cardinal now at sixteen, asked Paolo, to beg her, to take care, as it was so important for her health, and the health of others. He was concerned that the dancing and the hunting would not promote the well-being of the unborn baby…she lost the baby soon after that.

That same year, the Pope gave our third son, thirteen year old Garzia, the title of Commander of the Papal Fleet. In the November, news that our daughter, Lucrezia had been unwell for about a month, caused Cosimo to send the family doctor, to attend to her in Ferrara. Her symptoms were fevers, severe weight loss, constant coughing and a permanently bleeding nose…she, too, was suffering from tuberculosis…Andrea Pasquali wrote to us on the night of April 20, 1561: ‘We have reached the end. If God does not help her, we doubt that she will last the night.’ She died the next day.

Isabella now fretted even more about any symptoms of ill health, encouraged by all those around her…I can hear her now…”I am waiting to be able to take some exercise, to see if I can finally shake off this feeling of biliousness…, I am dead from fatigue. …I have another ear infection”. And yet, diet and exercise were important to my daughter’s sense of well-being. She wrote to Paolo thanking him for the gift of truffles, writing that she hadn’t had any because she was still on a diet and didn’t wish to succumb, but had stored them away really well. (Eleonora listens to music before she speaks)

I was brought up in a Spanish world in which my family only answered to the King. I made no effort to become a Florentine. I rarely gave concessions…By now, I had become remote from Florence and the Medici court, spending time with my youngest children. (She speaks in Spanish to them: Te adoro, te quiero) Francesco, the eldest, was disrespectful to me, lacking in gratitude, even though I thought of little else than his greatness. I was not in the best of health…I felt stronger in the August after a thermal treatment with the Porretta waters in Bologna, which are sulphureous and salty bromine-iodic waters, known to be effective in the cure of gastro-enterica and respiratory diseases. Later that year, the Venetian ambassador to Florence described me as a lady of rare liveliness, although I was always ill and every morning I threw up my food. Pasquali’s magical cures helped me seem well when dining in public, but I looked drawn in the face, and some of them said that I had a cadaverous look.

In October of the next year, we visited the Maremma country near Grosseto. Those court physicians strongly discouraged us, particularly me, from travelling and hunting in the marshy areas of Tuscany during the Autumn season. In November, my dearest son Cardinal Giovanni came to Livorno to be with Cosimo and I, and his two brothers. He had a fever, which worsened to the point where he couldn’t get out of bed. Cosimo told me that they took three ounces of blood from his veins, and it seemed that he began to be easier, but in a few hours he was worse again. Two mornings later, they applied leeches, who took a good two pounds of blood, along with all the other remedies they could possibly employ. That evening, November 20, at midnight, Giovanni received the last rites and died in his father’s arms. This mal’aria, this bad air, was la febbre – the fever that could bring about sudden death.

Two days after my Lord Cardinal’s death, Giovanni, just turned nineteen, was carried back to Florence in a box covered with gold embroidered black velvet, drawn by mules, and accompanied by all of his household. However, my younger sons, fifteen-year-old Garzia and thirteen-year-old Ferdinando, were also suffering from a bit of fever and Cosimo said that they were being well cared for, and believed that it was not truly dangerous. But, Garzia grew worse…and on December 10, he was in such a way that the doctors resolved to bleed him. Two days later came the report that Don Garzia has gone to a better life. (Silence) The doctors say that the illness was in his head, because he always had pain there.

Then, I, was with the fever…I had lost my two sons…just three weeks apart. In the last five years, I had lost Maria and Lucrezia…but to lose Garzia and dearest Giovanni…they had such greatness, deserved all the honours bestowed on them. After Giovanni’s death, I didn’t eat or sleep for three days. As Garzia went into decline, despite my own mal’aria symptoms, I would not let myself be governed by the doctors, as was my usual custom. After Garzia’s death, I suffered from incredible anxiety, I could not sleep, I was so desperate and afflicted. For the last twelve years of my life, I had suffered from irregular bouts of fever, from wasting away, I was constantly vomiting, had stomach pain, a huge calcium deficiency and intense dental pain, anemia and that persistent coughing, whilst haemorrhaging from my mouth. Sometimes I had pain in the lumbar region, in the shoulder and the elbow, hips, knees and ankles. Tuberculosis weakened me; malarial fever and my mental anguish, after my sons’ deaths, were too much for me. I lost the will to live. The Jesuit father heard my confession, and Cosimo sat with me. I passed from this life on December 17, 1562, five days after Garzia’s death at three in the morning.

(‘Remember me, my dear’ – 2 refrains before Eleonora speaks)

My body was prepared to be transported back here, dressed in my personal rich attire of everyday clothing worn in Pisa: an embroidered satin dress with a crimson red velvet bodice and dress underneath and crimson red silk knitted stockings. They laid me in the coffin, fearing contagion from my corpse, so that one string of my bodice was haphazardly laced, skipping eyelets; one stocking was put on inside out; crude silk strips were used to tie together my arms and legs, cuffing my wrists and ankles. As I lay in my coffin, one of my ladies cut some tresses of my reddish-blonde hair and wrapped it in a gold snood. (Lady in Waiting cuts hair and puts in snood)

Remember me, my dear.

The funeral procession made stops at the Duomo and other churches of the city…and here, (pause) before I arrived at San Lorenzo. (Almost whispered)

(Song ‘Remember me, my dear’ starts from beginning)

At my funeral, they spoke of my gifts of the spirit. (She sings: ‘Beni del animo’), gifts of the body (She sings: ‘Beni del corpo’), my regal and marvellous beauty - reale et maravigliosa bellezza, my ease in giving birth (She sings: ‘Facilita del partorire’), my piety and my fecundity. Men can distinguish themselves in a thousand ways in life, but women have only their fertility to pave the way to Heaven. (She takes out turquoise stones from her bodice)

Remember me, my dear.

These turquoise stones I give to Sulis Minerva, Goddess of Healing. I give to your divinity and to the spirit of this place, and ask you to permit sleep, health, well-being and happiness to all those here this evening, and this is my gift for Eleonora.

The Production

The Site

It is well known that every playing space has a unique impact on any piece of performance. The ethos for A Gift for Eleonora has been developed from a purposeful response to site as she tours to different playing spaces. These spaces range from UNESCO world heritage sites, to religious and spiritual sites, museums and galleries. The responses to site enable the location and its specific features to be woven into the performance text.

Performing in spaces other than those designed as theatres provokes different ways of playing but also innovative ways of engaging the audience, with audiences walking through or within a performance and forming a part of the environment themselves.

The performance at the Roman Baths develops this practice further by also providing a foci for why Eleonora is there, transcending time barriers and finding her own purpose in such a space. What also informs this performance though is the fact that theatre spaces have developed in the history of western theatre out of scared spaces and the link to early ritual and the heritage of classical theatre is inherent in certain types of religious spaces.

The production at the Roman Baths, Bath 2016 was designed to play with the site and the heritage of the space. We were particularly keen to draw out the link of the text to the space. In researching the baths it became clear that the site and its Celtic sacred heritage could be key to how we took this performance and made it unique. The thermal springs provide a theme for us of devotion, piety and reverence all of which chimes with Eleonora’s own life, of taking cures, prayer and wellbeing.

The hot-springs and the goddess, a combination of the Celtic Sulis and the Roman Minerva created Sulis Minerva, and this links to Eleonora’s taking of waters out in Porretta, Bologna. The romans tamed the spring’s source to create an ordered spa baths but were sensitive to take with them the people of the region and their gods and goddesses.

We have incorporated the offerings made to the goddess into the performance as the curses or prayers add another dimension to how this both practical and sacred space was used.

The Curses

The Roman Baths in Bath are one of the most fertile sites of former Roman Britain where curses or prayers have been excavated with over a 100 recovered from the sacred spring itself. It is from these that an understanding of their use, the ritual and the way they were inscribed is known. These small tablets are evidence of the words and wishes of people of the area and many are very simple in form.

"I curse Tretia Maria and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together, and her words, thoughts and memory; thus may she be unable to speak what things are concealed, nor be able."

Example curse translated by The British Museum.

The text themselves were inscribed or scratched into very thin sheets of lead with a stylus and then often rolled, folded or pierced with nails and then thrown into the spring. The lead was plentiful and also held the symbolic attributes of heaviness, coldness necessary for the sympathetic operation of the curse. In practice the lead was not always lead but could be pewter, which many of the Bath tablets are. It is thought that these would have been made in an ad hoc way by local craftspeople who made pewter vessels, which was a key industry in Bath.

At Bath the curses were found in the reservoir fed by the sacred spring. The reservoir supplied the hot baths but also became the focus for offerings.

Roman Britain was a multi-lingual society with an indigenous, Celtic speaking population, with the Roman conquest Latin was introduced and also Greek and the many tongues of the Roman Empire’s other provinces. Many Roman Britons continued to speak the Celtic language(s) they had spoken before the conquest (the ancestor(s) of Welsh, Cornish and Breton) for everyday purposes. Writers of the tablets used a wide range of scripts. Most were written in ‘cursive’, a script used for everyday documents and letters.

The writing of curses was manipulated for magical and symbolic effect with letters written in mirror-image form or the order of letters in a word, or words in a line, or of lines in a text, reversed. Tablets are also found with ‘pseudo-inscriptions’, scratches made to imitate writing, or sometimes with no trace of writing at all. However, the writing of curses required an ability to write and expertise in the appropriate form that a curse should take.

Where motives for curses are specified, obtaining redress against a thief is the commonest. The tablets from Bath often seek to recover portable items, especially clothing, jewellery and small sums of money, many probably stolen from bathers at the spa.

The gods of Roman Britain and Celtic Britain were united through this process. The most famous case of ‘double-naming’ of the gods in Britain is the matching of Sulis, goddess of the spring at Bath, with Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom, addressed most often in curses as Sulis only, but sometimes as Sulis Minerva. This identification of the two deities was acceptable to both provincials and to Roman outsiders.

Behind the magic of curses lies the principle of ‘sympathy’, the characteristics of the curse and the treatment to which it was subjected were extended to the victims of the curse. The offering in springs would drag them downward towards the deities of the underworld. Together these different facets were thought to ‘fix’ or ‘bind’ the victim. The curse presented the gods or spirits with an ‘analogy’ for the way in which they should put it into effect.