

“My Two Marilyn’s, Ready for Broadway” (LA STAMPA)

Debuting in Turin, *Love is Blonde*, an adaptation by Argia Coppola of the book by Joyce Carol Oates: the regular woman and the star in the mirror.

“Tonight, let me be me:” practically a plea from Norma to Marilyn. To which the latter replies: “You? There’s no you anymore, Norma. You can’t handle what’s out there. I can.” The dialogue is dire: “Don’t forget, Norma Jeane: if I fail, you die.” “And you remember;” Norma stabs back: “I created you.” The circle is sealed: one holds the life of the other in her hands.

“Norma is the girl from California, who came from nothing, who faces off against Marilyn, the successful and beautiful woman: she is the American myth:” this is the entry into the icon given by Argia Coppola, author of *Love is Blonde*, the first stage adaptation of the American novel *Blonde*, by Joyce Carol Oates: the mise-en-scene of the existence of Marilyn Monroe, depicted on the stage for the first time: with a debut in Turin on November 30th at the Astra theater, directed by Cristina Pezzoli and featuring Vera Dragone and Silvia Giulia Amendola.

There are two actresses, and thus two Marilyn’s: the regular woman who had a difficult childhood, a non-existent father and has memories of living in an orphanage. And in the mirror, the idolized star, the most desired woman in the world, and her relationships with the men in her life, Joe DiMaggio, Arthur Miller and JFK. One is seen through the eyes of the other: “they share a story of loneliness, violence, which is at the same time an incredible existential fable, which comes back to a question: what price is one willing to pay to be immortal?;” continues Coppola, 38, who hails from Turin but who has lived for the last four years in New York, where she moved to pursue a doctorate at Columbia University.

Yet Coppola’s encounter with the American writer began in Italy. “I read the book *Blonde* because my trusted bookseller in Turin, Comunardi, recommended it, and I immediately grasped that in America, and elsewhere, Marilyn was misunderstood.” As the author goes on to say, “she was a woman who loved to play with fire and it is with her that the ‘dark side’ of American cinema was born.”

This dark side still exists, and has never been more relevant. To the extent that the hour-and-twenty-minute-long script has a specific scene that is unbearable in its transparent violence, it is Marilyn-Vera Dragone fishing out of her memory the details of the abuse she suffered at the hands of a producer: “I was down on my hands, soft white fur under my knees and he...that is, I couldn’t speak.” “It is in that moment that Norma becomes Marilyn and the gates of

Hollywood open up for her,” explains Argia Coppola, who, to obtain the rights for the book, the only ones granted, began writing to Joyce Carol Oates in 2013 and who only met the latter in person this year, over dinner, to talk about the show. “Bear in mind, however, that Marilyn is a great actress. Her life was derailed when she lost her child with Arthur Miller, their relationship ended, and her success grew, to the point of a delusion of omnipotence.” To the point where she lost her head for President Kennedy. “This play is a work in progress,” notes the playwright, in conclusion. “We held readings in New York for seven different versions, but next Spring the show will appear Off-Broadway and I am working on the complete version of Marilyn’s life.”

Always with the doubling of the “blonde doll,” but with brains: “in our ‘studio’ we went beyond the idea of dumb and sexy” adds the director, Cristina Pezzoli. “And we set up Norma as the soul, as the ‘damaged’ part of her life, and Marilyn as the character, as the passion.” The two were made to duel, with blonde wigs and flashy lipstick: one dies, having been killed, the other takes her own life. Yet, they both vanish together.

Monroe the myth

Above, from the left, Silvia Giulia Amendola (Norma) and Vera Dragone (Marilyn, also in the picture to the right). Love is Blonde debuts on November 30th at the Astra Theater.

Above, Argia Coppola, from Turin, 38, author of the first stage adaptation of the American novel Blonde by Joyce Carol Oates.

This show is a work in progress, we held readings in New York for seven versions.

--Argia Coppola,

Author of the adaptation Love is Blonde

(translated by Samuel Fleck)

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"Marilyn, Weinstein's First Victim"
(CORRIERE DELLA SERA, LA LETTURA)

By Laura Zangarini

Fifty-five years ago, the actress who had begun her life as Norma Jeane Baker was found dead at her Brentwood home, in Los Angeles, California. According to the "Los Angeles Times," the cause of Marilyn Monroe's death was a barbiturate overdose. Howard Hertel and Don Neff, the reporters who wrote the article, published photographs of the scene along with a few words: "The blond, 36-year-old actress was nude, lying face down on her bed and clutching a telephone receiver in her hand." It was a disturbing piece of news. Many years later, inspired by this death, Joyce Carol Oates would write one of her most beloved novels, *Blonde* (2000), Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist. A bestseller of more than seven hundred pages which, as Oates herself reveals, was meant "to be a short story of 175 pages." "Over time, however, I became captivated by Marilyn's world to a point where I could not stop writing."

Of all the author's books, *Blonde* is not only the longest—the original edition was 1,400 pages—but one of the most well-researched. Oates, who spent more than two years studying the star's life, described the novel as a "posthumous autobiography, narrated by Marilyn herself: an archetype that tells us something about ourselves, about her time and ours." An icon who set herself up to transcend the trends and the time, as is proven, decade after decade, by each new generation. Argia Coppola, a playwright and actress born in 1978, has also remained transfixed by the myth of Marilyn, to whom she dedicated *Love is Blonde*, the first stage adaptation of Oates's novel. The American author was so struck by the work of the young playwright that she granted her the exclusive rights to stage *Blonde* in Italy and in the United States. The show will debut on November 30th (with encore performances through December 3rd) at the Astra Theater in Turin, under the direction of Cristina Pezzoli.

A version of *Love is Blonde* was presented at Oxford University, as a work in progress, in September 2014; two months later the text received its first table reading, and was met with a highly favorable response from the audience. Since then the project has continued its unstoppable march forward, bringing on board two additional women, the director Cristina Pezzoli and the Georgian-American stylist, Irina Shabayeva. *Love is Blonde*, the playwright is proud to note, is also expected to open Off-Broadway in 2018. Today, in looking back at the genesis of the text, Argia says she is convinced that it was born out of "an ensemble of factors and coincidences, partly inexplicable, or explicable after the fact: a desire and an ambition to write about a controversial, revolutionary and tragic female

character." The choice did not immediately fall on Marilyn, however. "For me, this was not an obsession," Argia stresses, "by which I mean that it was Marilyn who chose me to write her story: a trip to New York in 2012 which then became a decision to finish my PhD in Playwriting at Columbia University, and to choose a creative project to produce on the spot. My first work in English."

The fifty years since Marilyn's death have brought with them the beginnings of a more complex way of talking about the star. "Unpublished material emerged, never exposed. Around that same time, my trusted bookseller literally put Oates's novel into my hands, telling me that to understand America, I would need to get through it." She was also presented with the opportunity to access "a couple of letters from the personal archive of Norma Jeane Baker/Marilyn, preserved at the University of California, and in them I found a painful event from her childhood, told as though it were a dream—something that did not happen to her. Marilyn uses her imagination to change reality and to react to pain in an unexpected way. I felt an immediate connection, and in that moment, I decided that her story was an important one to tell for women today; that she was a misunderstood woman, never got (as is often the case for women), different from what the world believed. I was happy to discover, during a recent dinner with Oates, that she thought of it the same way. When I read the first words of her novel, "and then came death..." I understood that I would not have been able to write a new text without this novel. I feel a profound gratitude to this great author for having written such an extensive, powerful, complex work."

In *Love is Blonde*, real, historical events and fiction are woven together. What emerges with force from the story is a woman's attempt to make her way in a society dominated by men, in the context of Hollywood. "The play tells the story of two women, Marilyn and Norma (Vera Dragone and Silvia Giulia Amendola), who are the same person, but in conflict, with different needs and desires. It tells of an infinite quest for love, always in the wrong place, 'misplaced,' something which the director Cristina Pezzoli has captured with great sensitivity. It tells of a woman's climb up the social ladder from nothing to immortality; her whole life from 1926 to 1962, her first nude, her extremely rapid and unexpected success, the price she paid (the episode with Mr. Z: the reference is to Darryl F. Zanuck, founder and producer at 20th Century Fox), her relationships with the three important men in her life, the ex-ball-player (Joe DiMaggio), the playwright (Arthur Miller), the president (John Fitzgerald Kennedy), her death at only 36 years of age. It also tells of a mysterious murder plot in America in the fifties and sixties, made to look like a 'probable suicide.' She became a source of trouble, they got rid of her because she was a potential danger."

Marilyn, too, was subjected to the casting couch (casting couch), the sleazy ritual whereby the heads of production studios abused their power by forcing actresses to engage in sexual acts. "I slept with producers: I would be a liar if I said otherwise," the star once declared. "If I hadn't done it, there would have been 25

girls ready to do it in my place.” “Hollywood has always had its Weinstains,” Argia comments, “and Marilyn decided to use this situation to her advantage. Love is Blonde also tells of this, the price we are willing to pay to satisfy our most profound desires. It will be up to those watching the production to decide if the story of Marilyn is a story of tragic abuses and loneliness or if it is the triumphant fable of an immortal life. Let us not forget that the future ‘blond bombshell’ spent her childhood and adolescence in the care of eleven different fosters families because her mother was confined to a mental health clinic. She had a desperate need to feel loved, accepted.” A few weeks ago, Joan Collins told how Marilyn warned her about the “wolves of Hollywood:” “if you don’t give them what they want, they will tear up your contract. They did it for so many girls.” “Well, it is proof that the Weinstein case has its precedents,” observes Argia.

How did she manage to convince Joyce Carol Oates to grant her the rights to Blonde? “With patience, determination (never, ever, ever giving up) and a fantastic —and expensive—intellectual property lawyer from Harvard. At first, she had no intention of giving me the rights, as she considered the undertaking virtually impossible: I convinced her by writing her various letters titled ‘I’m a little blue wren, you are an eagle’ (I am a wren, you are an eagle). Joyce has a passion, made clear in the novel, for the world of winged creatures and birds of prey; they belong to her literary imaginary. I won her over with time and hard work and with the quality and rigor of the project. It took about a year and half. At the end she put my latest draft to rest with a single word: impressive.”

Doublings

“The play tells the story of two women, Marilyn and Norma, who are the same person but with different needs and desires.”

Compromises

“The ‘casting couch’ has always been a practice in Hollywood. Marilyn decided to use this situation to her advantage.”

The writer

Joyce Carol Oates (Lockport, New York, 1938: pictured above) is the author of nearly a hundred books, including short stories, essays and dramatic works. In *Blonde* (1999), she narrates—in a romantic key—the life of a contemporary icon: Marilyn Monroe. A bestseller, the book was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize (2001), and for the National Book Award (2000). The Italian version of the book was released in 2000 by Bompiani, with the translation by Sergio Claudio Perroni, and has gone on to see several new editions.

The Playwright

Argia Coppola (Turin, 1978), actress and playwright, lives in New York. In the photograph on the left, she is standing at Broadway and 42nd St., in the theater district. She is holding the book of photography by Milton H. Greene, Marilyn Monroe, a photographer, his muse.

The Show

Based on *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates, and directed by Cristina Pezzoli, *Love is Blonde* will have its first national debut on November 30th at the Astra Theater in Turin (via Rosolino Pilo 6, for information and reservations: 011/5634352) where it will run until December 3rd. Tickets: from 22 to 10 euros.

Mythologies

Argia Coppola brings to the stage, in Turin and in New York, *Love is Blonde*, the tragic and sublime story of an absolute icon and of the woman out of whom she arose. (Also) inspired by the book by Joyce Carol Oates and with a (hardly surprising) analogy to the Hollywood scandals.

(translated by Samuel Fleck)



"Unforgettable Icons"

(IO DONNA magazine)

Joyce Carol Oates

MARILYN, THE MISUNDERSTOOD

By Maria Laura Giovagnini

"She might still be alive today if she had cultivated a career on the stage," the writer maintains. She wrote a monumental biography of Monroe, which is now coming to the stage. And it lends itself to a reflection on the relationship between actresses and men in power.

She has written 56 novels, 39 collections of short stories, 18 essays, a memoir, 9 plays, 11 books of poetry, 6 for teenagers and 4 for children. For years, she has been on the short list of authors in the running for the Nobel Prize. But now, at nearly 80 years of age (she will be in June), Joyce Carol Oates has no doubts about what she considers to be her masterpiece: *Blonde*, from 1999. A rousing, monumental and freewheeling biography of Norma Jeane Baker, known to history as Marilyn Monroe.

"Certainly, my most difficult novel technically, and one of the most heartfelt. I am enthusiastic about it now being brought to the stage." *Love is Blonde*, the other Marilyn—an adaptation by Turin native (now living in New York) Argia Coppola—which debuts at the Astra theater in Piedmont's capital on November 30th, before heading to New York in 2018.

Marilyn has become an icon. Why?

To be honest, I consider her one of the great underestimated actresses of the 20th Century. I saw her films from the first (*Asphalt Jungle*) to the last (*The Misfits*): what a remarkable career! The comic genius of *Some Like It Hot* would have been enough to guarantee enduring fame, and instead the character of Sugar is only one of numerous roles inhabited by Marilyn Monroe, memorably. My favorite is *Niagara*, the one that first brought her to fame/notoriety. Unfortunately, following this, she was misunderstood as an actress who played "only herself." Take, for instance, the complexity of her role in *The Misfits*: the seductive blond woman who is the object of the men's interest who feels herself under scrutiny, as if she imagined herself an imposter.

"Imposter Syndrome" is characteristically feminine: women who don't feel "worthy" of the success they have achieved. Did Monroe also suffer from this during her life?

Marilyn Monroe was a stage name, a phenomenon of heavy makeup and glamour, bleached platinum-blond hair and flashy, skin-tight clothes. In effect, a costume. The real Norma Jeane would certainly have felt inadequate, an imposter. It is a pity that Arthur Miller did not allow her to continue as a stage actress in New York, but encouraged her to take on *The Misfits*—for the money. Otherwise it is not unlikely that she might still be alive today, and she might have cultivated a career on stage: she had the talent, the stamina and the drive.

What inspired you to write 700 pages about the star?

A photograph of her taken when she was 16 years old: she was not yet blond, pretty but not glamorous or startlingly beautiful. Rather, she resembled the girls from my mother's generation: courageous, stoic, hard-working, uncomplaining, making their way in a sexist world. To a degree, she even resembles my own mother, born of an era when life was hard economically and the "American Dream" was still a palpable fantasy for many. Though Marilyn Monroe was not an "Okie" she was of that background. Her father never acknowledged her, her mother was a schizophrenic who could not take care of her (she could barely stand to touch her), and yet refused to allow her to be adopted by more stable adults. That the girl would so yearn to be loved—to fill in the "hole" in her heart, of intense emptiness—seemed but a part of her destiny.

There is a famous quote by Marilyn that goes: "You can take a girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of a girl." It is like saying: your weaknesses do not leave you.

She did not say that, it has been attributed to her. She grew up in foster homes and orphanages, and did not ever live in a small town. If she had, she would possibly have felt more secure in her identity: she would have had a higher self-estimate and her confidence would have been less shaky. She did not accept that anyone might love her—really: she pursued men who exuded power, like Joe di Maggio and Miller. Judgmental but protective "fathers."

It has been 55 years since her death and some producers—as you had decried—continue to leave a stain with their abuses. So many feminist struggles and we are still in that place...

This is true to a degree, but many female performers—Madonna, Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie—have become shrewd bargainers and have their own retinue of lawyers. Each day brings new disclosures and allegations of sexual harassment in the US: shocking, not surprising. Donald Trump has been accused of sexual harassment and the pending lawsuits against him will not be expedited so long as he is in office.

Hollywood stars are not as naïve as the farmer women whose rapes you portray in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. Is there a point at which women start to share a part of the responsibility?

Difficult to answer: each case is unique. I can only point out that in so many cases it is question of older men to the detriment of young women and girls. And let's not forget about the child victims of rape.

All subject matter that seems like the stuff of nightmares...what are you working on right now?

A novel about a well-to-do family suddenly in crisis when the father dies; the surviving wife and children undergo significant changes in their lives. The widow —having fallen into a depression—is attracted to suicide initially. But she perseveres, and eventually meets a man who has been through a struggle of his own. *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars* (from a verse by Walt Whitman, ndr) is in many ways an alternate-Blonde novel: it is about a family, that permanent family that Marilyn never managed to achieve.

Four portraits of Marilyn Monroe (above, in a scene from *Niagara*, the 1953 film which launched her definitively to fame). The actress died in 1953, at 36 years of age, in Los Angeles. On the opposite page, the writer Joyce Carol Oates, 79.

“That she should so yearn to be loved—to fill in the “hole” in her heart, of intense emptiness—seemed but a part of her destiny.”

Marilyn Monroe. Joyce Carol Oates wrote her 1999 novel, *Blonde*, on the life of the actress. The book is now being made into a theatrical production.

(translated by Samuel Fleck)

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