



## Bernhardt, Sarah (1844-1923)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A vivid and complex personality, Sarah Bernhardt was the most famous actress of her time, and her name has continued to mean glamor and drama even to those who have never seen her films or even her photograph. Sometimes called the "mother of all divas," Bernhardt was almost as famous for her sumptuous, flamboyant style as for her skillful acting.

However, Bernhardt was much more than a stage personality. She was also a painter, sculptor, and writer, as well as a savvy businesswoman who ran her own theaters and produced her own plays. She both scandalized and titillated Paris and the world by wearing pants, taking men's roles in some of her plays, and having numerous conspicuous love affairs, some with women.

Born Henriette Rosine Bernard in Paris on October 22, 1844, Bernhardt was the illegitimate daughter of a Jewish Dutch mother and a French Catholic father. Her father remained in her life long enough to send her to convent school, and she was baptized in 1857.

Although she practiced Christianity, she always remained connected to her Jewish roots, through many of the roles she played, through her public stance against anti-Semitism, and through critics' constant harping on the size of her nose.

When she was thirteen, Bernhardt entered the Paris Conservatory, and by 1866, she was performing at the Odeon Theater, followed by a stint at the Comédie Française in 1872. Her early appearances were not well received, but once her resonant voice and deeply emotional acting touched the public imagination, her fame began to skyrocket.

In 1880 she began to tour Europe and the United States, bringing a touch of her lavish Continental style to American vaudeville. The enormous quantity of her baggage became legendary, as did her extravagant costumes, both on-stage and off.

Fans loved her quirky behavior, and stories soon spread about the coffin she napped in before performances and the outlandish men's clothes she wore to paint in.

In 1893, Bernhardt began to manage her first theater, the *Théâtre de la Renaissance*, and soon she took over the *Théâtre des Nations*, transforming it into the *Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt*. There she performed in both her old triumphs, such as Racine's *Phaedra*, and in new productions, some of which she wrote herself, such as *L'Aveu* (1888) and *Un Coeur d'homme* (1909).

She often took male roles, horrifying some critics when she donned a beard to play Shylock. In 1900, Edmund Rostand wrote a male lead especially for Bernhardt in his play about Napoleon's son, *L'Aiglon*.



**Top:** A portrait of Sarah Bernhardt by William Downey.

**Above:** A portrait by Felix Nadar. Image of the Downey portrait courtesy Giovanni Dall'Orto.

Bernhardt enjoyed shocking the public. In 1864 she had an illegitimate son. In 1882, she married (briefly) Greek actor Jacques Damala, but she had many love affairs both before and after her marriage. Her lovers included Victor Hugo and Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales.

Bernhardt was more discreet about her lesbian affairs, and less is known about them. She also had a close twenty-year friendship with gay British playwright Oscar Wilde. At her request, he wrote his play *Salome* for her in 1892.

In 1905, Bernhardt injured her right knee. The injury continued to trouble her, and in 1915 her leg was amputated. She continued to perform from a chair until her death from kidney failure in 1923.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.