

A STAR'S LIFE

A one-woman play about the groundbreaking French actress Sarah Bernhardt makes its world premiere in Eugene



Michigan State University Theater Archives

PLAY PREVIEW

I, Sarah

What: World premiere of a one-woman play based on the life of actress Sarah Bernhardt by New York playwright and Eugene native Robert Cabell

Where: Actors Cabaret Annex, 39 W. 10th Ave.

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and Feb. 17-18; matinees at 2 p.m. Sunday and Feb. 19

Tickets: \$14 reserved, 683-4368

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By **BOB KEEFER**
The Register-Guard

Once upon a time, Sarah Bernhardt was the most famous woman in the world. The French actress, who lived from 1844 to 1923, revolutionized acting with her deeply emotional approach to the stage. She enjoyed a scandalous love life and the patronage of European royals.

At a time when stiff formalism prevailed in acting, she brought unprecedented physical magnetism to her roles.

Now a new play about her life, written by a successful New York playwright who grew up in

Eugene, is making its world premiere at Actors Cabaret of Eugene.

"I, Sarah" is a one-woman show written by Robert Cabell, whose musicals "Pretty Faces" (1990) and "Two Hearts Over Easy" (1994) had successful off-Broadway runs.

Cabell adapted "I, Sarah," a 90-minute, two-act monologue, from a trilogy of one-act plays he wrote about Bernhardt in 2000.

"She was one of the most famous actresses the world has ever known," Cabell said by phone from his New York home.

"She lived the most amazing life anyone in the world has ever lived. That's true! Born from a French courtesan, by the time she was 32 she was the most famous woman in the entire world.

"If you stacked one copy of each picture taken of Sarah Bernhardt on top of each other the pile would be higher than the Eiffel Tower."

Researching Bernhardt's life was absorbing, Cabell said.

"I spent weeks doing nothing but writing down her rhythms," he said. "I wrote down long, long lists of her vocabulary. I looked at letters she had written to Oscar Wilde. I went to the rare records department (at the Library for the Performing Arts in New York) and read scripts where she had scribbled in the margins. I read everything I could find about her, and listened to her speech."

Eugene actress Mindy Nirenstein, a regular on

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THOMAS BOYD / The Register-Guard

Mindy Nirenstein acts out a death scene in "I, Sarah," a play in which she stars as actress Sarah Bernhardt, famous for dramatic stage deaths. **Above:** The real Bernhardt.

THE REGISTER-GUARD **ARTS** THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2006

Play: Act melodramatic, but not too much

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stages here, will play Bernhardt.

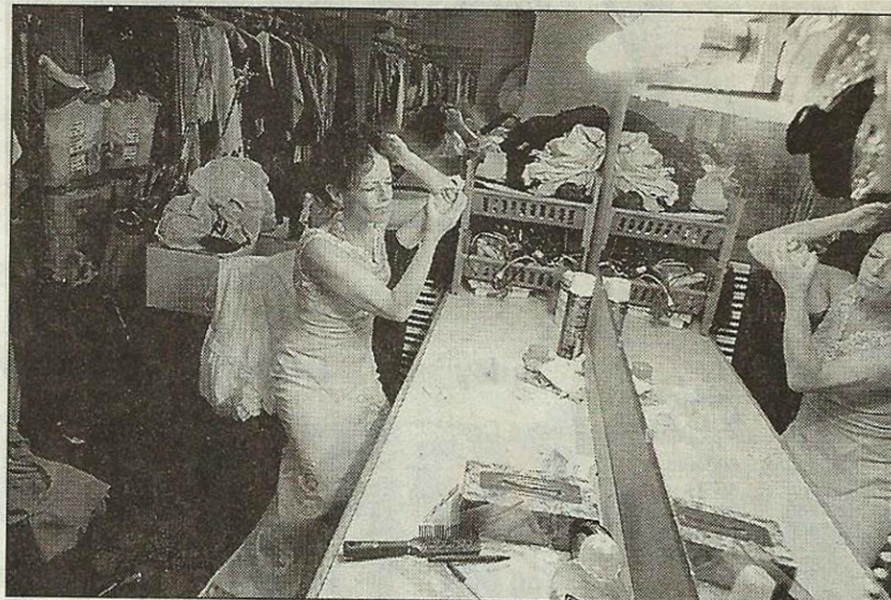
The challenge, she explained during a recent rehearsal break, is to find a middle ground between strict historical accuracy (clearly impossible, as Bernhardt always performed in French) and an acting style Eugene audiences will accept in 2006.

The real Bernhardt was the mistress of the grand gesture. She was famous for her over-the-top death scenes, in which she would melodramatically fade away for half an hour or more on stage.

With the help of director Joe Zingo, Nirenstein is trying to incorporate that melodrama without creating a giggle factor.

"I'm trying not to go so overboard that a contemporary audience won't believe it," she said, "and still be true to what she was really like."

To find that middle ground, the actress has been working with a diction coach to capture



THOMAS BOYD / The Register-Guard

Mindy Nirenstein prepares backstage for a dress rehearsal of "I, Sarah," a new play by Robert Cabell, a Eugene native.

just the right French accent — enough to suggest Bernhardt but not so much as to make her speech too difficult for an audience to understand.

Zingo agrees that historical accuracy can go too far, even in a history play. For example, he says, Bernhardt's actual speech

patterns, as recorded in the last years of her life, were oddly monotonic.

"I was very surprised when I heard her," the director said. "You listen to her, and it's all one note, even though her voice was capable of a span of three octaves."

Zingo is his own set designer for this play; the action will all take place within a lush evocation of Bernhardt's boudoir, complete with furs and feathered boas, framed photographs and dark, carved wood screens.

Cabell and Zingo have been working together for years to cement a New York-Eugene theater connection.

They both hope the short Eugene run of "I, Sarah" will ultimately lead to performances of the play around the country and even, possibly, to an off-Broadway production.

To help make that happen, Cabell plans to bring Tony Award-winning New York producer Jane Bergere ("Metamorphoses"; "Caroline, or Change") to see "I, Sarah" here in Eugene.

"I had given her 'Sarah' to read a year ago," Cabell said. "Not for New York — I wanted her to show it to some regional theaters. And she hadn't done it yet! So I said, 'Listen, it's opening up in Eugene. Let's just hop on a plane and go see it.'"