

'I, Sarah' a fun glimpse at real drama queen

By Dorothy Velasco

Published: Tuesday, February 14, 2006

Sarah Bernhardt was the most famous actress of her era and, in fact, probably the most famous actress who ever lived. Although she acted only in French, she toured the world, performing before dazzled audiences from Russia, to the heartland of America, to remote Argentina. Mindy Nirenstein is currently bringing this fascinating character to life at the Actors Cabaret Annex. In the west coast premiere of "I, Sarah" by Robert Cabell, Nirenstein creates a fascinating portrayal of the shrewd, eccentric and sublimely romantic Madame Bernhardt. In addition to directing and designing the production, Joe Zingo served as dramaturge in the development of the witty, intelligent script, a role comparable to that of a midwife. "I, Sarah" provides a wealth of information about the life and career of Bernhardt, as well as revealing the political events of the era.



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.

At the beginning of the play we see Bernhardt on her deathbed. Her bedspread and drapes are made of leopard skins, and every inch of the stage is covered with something plush and luxurious. Talking directly to the audience, the dying actress rises from her bed to sort out the triumphs and traumas of her life before she departs this Earth. The Bernhardt we meet is enormously charming, her great passions intermingling with her droll wit. In mentioning a lover of her

aunt, she says, "He could tell you to go to hell so tactfully that you'd look forward to the journey." She became pregnant by a Belgian prince at the age of 18, and when she tearfully told him about it his response was that if you sit on a lot of thorns you don't know which one pricked you. She goes on to joke about the analogy in no uncertain terms.

Interspersed between anecdotes, stories and juicy tidbits, she performs excerpts from several of her most acclaimed roles, some of them classical and others written specifically for her. In "Phedre" by Jean Racine, Bernhardt plays the second wife of the Greek hero Theseus, doomed by her lust for her stepson. In "La Dame aux Camélias" by Alexandre Dumas, she portrays the young courtesan who came to be known to the world as Camille, dying of tuberculosis and ennobled by sacrificing her love.

Popular playwright Victorien Sardou wrote tour de force roles for Bernhardt in "Fedora," "Theodora" and "La Tosca." These plays are flagrant melodramas, and Bernhardt milked them for every tear and for every fat contract she could get. Bernhardt's specialty was dying - in every way imaginable and extending her death scenes however long the audience desired. She tells us the citizens of 52 cities in the United States could say that she died in their hometown.

When Nirenstein talks to us directly as Bernhardt, she is natural, conversational and humorous. Sometimes there's a sort of wink, but the only time the style becomes campy is when she sings "La Marseillaise" in a wartime setting.

In portraying Bernhardt's famous roles, most of which were tragic or melodramatic, she combines an extremely focused intensity of purpose with deeply felt but restrained emotion. Her sentiments are distilled to their simple, direct essence. She performs these scenes so well that I wanted to see the entire plays, even though I know full well that most of them are no longer significant. Portraying an actor of an earlier era is a particular challenge. A great actor of 100 years ago performed quite differently from one today.

Bernhardt's style was considered natural and realistic far beyond any acting witnessed previously. But when we see her in silent films, some of which are shown at the beginning of each act, her gestures seem extravagant. Nirenstein wisely tones down the gestures and creates a style that seems of the period but at the same time realistic enough for us to find the characters believable. It's not an easy feat, but she succeeds admirably.

"I, Sarah" probably will go on to productions in New York and elsewhere. But here in Eugene, we're privileged to see it first.

Springfield playwright Dorothy Velasco reviews theater for The Register-Guard.