

Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse: two classics of theatre history. What started as a true admiration of Bernhardt on Duse's end eventually turned into a rivalry of the ages. Duse long admired and looked up to Bernhardt, keeping a postcard of her as a memento years before she first saw her perform in 1882. Their famed rivalry is rumored to have begun when Gabriele d'Annunzio, the love of Duse's life, cast Bernhardt over Duse in one of his plays. Their highly publicized artistic feud also centered on their distinct and opposed approaches to acting technique and artistry.

After deciding to study acting at the encouragement of a family friend, Sarah Bernhardt's first major performance was in 1862 as a company member with France's national theatre, the Comédie Française, in the title role of Jean Racine's *Iphigénie*. The production unfortunately was disastrous, rumored to have been made worse by Bernhardt's obvious stage fright and rushed dialogue. In fact, after curtain, Bernhardt apologized to her teacher, Jean-Baptiste Provost, who replied, "I forgive you, and you'll eventually forgive yourself, but Racine in his grave never will." After performing a few more roles with the company, Bernhardt eventually left because her stage fright, perceived histrionics, and poor performances drove a wedge between her and other company members. She then went to Théâtre du Gymnase, but continued to be dissatisfied with her work, and left abruptly to travel abroad. Bernhardt met a Belgian aristocrat and the two began a romantic affair, which led to the birth of their son Maurice in 1864. Upon her return to Paris, she performed some minor roles at the melodrama theatre, Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin. Her new "big break" came when she was hired by the director of the famed Theatre de L'Odeon, where Bernhardt established herself and her craft remaining with the company for six years.

Over the next 50 years, Bernhardt would become the most famous actress in the world. She traveled internationally performing iconic lead roles, such as Joan of Arc, Cleopatra, and Hamlet. (*Oh, ze classics!*) The nickname "golden voice" was given to her by Victor Hugo and reflects the Romantic and emotional style of acting she excelled at. Critics of the era noted her performances for their calculated and elegant physical action, and her ability to subvert audience expectations of character as she emphasized strength in weaker characters, and weakness in stronger ones. Bernhardt was most celebrated for her performances of tragic figures, thanks to her bombastic acting style, and her dynamic and luxurious personal life – obsessively covered by

the press. Bernhardt capitalized on the media's attention, becoming the world's first global superstar!

Eleanora Duse was born in northern Italy into a family of theatre performers and made her acting debut at the age of four as Cosette in *Les Misérables* with her family's touring company. After the company disbanded, Duse sought new opportunities within Italy, eventually becoming a *prima donna* in the Cesare Rossi company. Duse performed the lead in Emile Zola's *Therese Raquin* in 1878, which drew critical praise.

In 1882, Eleanora Duse got to see Sarah Bernhardt perform in *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas. Duse reports she held her breath as Bernhardt took the stage in her sparkling gown: "I went every night and cried," she told the press in her later years. Inspired by the moving performance she'd witnessed, for the next three years she acted in plays by Dumas, the first role being Lionette in *La Princesse de Bagdad*. It was in these years Eleanora really honed her more modern and Realistic acting style. She relied heavily on connecting with the internal life of her characters and their unique needs within the play's text, rather than the presentational stock expressions most other Romantic actors relied on at the time. Duse called her acting style an "elimination of self."

Years later, Duse began her own international tour. She selected *La Dame aux Camélias*, the very same piece she'd first seen Bernhardt perform. In 1886, Duse formed her own company, the Drama Company of the City of Rome. Until her retirement from acting in 1909, Duse travelled throughout Europe and the U.S., becoming one of the world's most respected actresses of the new modern style. Author James Joyce, modernist choreographer Martha Graham, and actress Eva Le Gallienne each claimed to have been inspired and influenced by her work. While her professional star power rivalled Bernhardt's, Duse chose to live a quieter personal life, avoiding the prying press at every turn.

Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse: two sides of the same coin. (*Performing in ze same role on ze same night on ze same street!*) I invite you to travel back in time with us and immerse yourself in the world of *A Divine Kerfuffle* by H. Russ Brown and delight in the ferocity of these two magnificent divas of the stage!

(*Moment, moment, moment...*)

Emily M. Shaffer, Dramaturg.