

Sarah Bernhardt

### *Family Ties and Early Beginnings*

Sarah Bernhardt, birth name Henriette Rosine Bernard, was born on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1844, to Julie Bernard. Sarah's father is unclear. It is possible he was a man named Morel, a young man who became a naval officer. Edouard Bernard, Sarah's uncle, legally became Sarah's father when she was 13.. Sarah was the oldest of three. Her two younger sisters were Jeanne, born 1851, and Regine, born 1853.

Sarah's childhood was spent in a pension, where she was cared for by a paid nurse, and in the Grandchamp Augustine convent school by Versailles. Once she was old enough, Bernhardt spent two years at the Conservatoire de Musique et Declamation in Paris

to study acting. This is the same school where the famous Jewish actress Eliza Rachel Felix rose to fame, along with her acting style. Eliza's acting style became the norm. It was studying here where Bernhardt chose Sarah as her stage name.



Figure 1: Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt.

### *Facing Prejudice*

Sarah became aware that Eliza's fame and her own would be linked to romantic and antisemitic fascinations of Jewish women. The Jewish identity brought forth antisemitic caricatures attacking and painting them in a greedy light, a light of which is assumed. After the antisemitic caricatures came antisemitic contemporary novels. A few that caught the spotlight

were *La Faustin* by Edmond de Goncourt, *Dina Samuel* by Felicien Champsaur, and *Les Memoires de Sarah Barnum* by Marie Colombier.

In 1871, Sarah defended herself against the press, who was accusing her of being both German and Jewish. Reported in Sarah's many biographies, she proudly said, "Jewish most certainly, but German, no." More than a decade later, author Jules Huret came out with a book on Sarah in which he quoted her words in relation to the accusations. "If I have a foreign accent—which I must regret—it is cosmopolitan, but not Teutonic. I am a daughter of the great Jewish race, and my somewhat uncultivated language is the outcome of our enforced wanderings." Later when Sarah gained her way of living independently and navigating fame, she brought her company around the world. Sarah took the enforced wanderer and turned it into an internationally admired and welcomed star.

### *Performing and Growing in her Artistry*

Sarah's first performance was in 1862 at the national theatre, the Comedie Francaise, as Iphigenie. In this role she suffered greatly from stage fright, but she was successful! Bernhardt continued to work with the Comedie Francaise in her next role, Henrietta, in Moliere's *Les Femmes Savates*. The role unfortunately didn't last long, only two months, seeing as Sarah slapped an older actress. The reason is unknown. This action resulted in Sarah being asked to leave the Comedie Francaise. She then went to Gymnase-Dramatique, another decent theatre in the area, but only was getting minor roles, so she decided to leave and travel to Brussels.

In Brussels, Sarah Bernhardt met Henri Prince de Ligne. On December 22, 1864, Sarah gave birth to her only son Maurice, her child with Ligne. Although accepting minor roles wasn't something she was open to in the past, she now had a family to support and willingly accepted minor roles at the melodrama theatre, Port-Saint-Martin. Sarah was at that theatre for quite some time before she was hired by the director of the Theatre de l'Odeon. At l'Odeon is where Sarah established herself and her craft. Six years after she was hired, she developed a reputation of being a leading actress. 1872 is when Comedie Francaise invited her back, due to her success. She received celebrity status with the Comedie Francaise by playing Phedra in 1874 and Dona Sol in *Hernani* in 1877.

The term “golden voice” is the lyrical voice Sarah developed her emotional romantic style of acting from. It was one of the pillars of her acting style along with calculated nervous action, the subversion of the expectation of her characters, strength in weakness, and weakness in strength. Sarah had a strength in acting in tragedies, thanks to her acting style. She acted as Zanetto in *Le Passant* and was the record says it was impressive.

Early 1880, Sarah resigned from the Comedie Francaise and went on tour with her own company in Europe and the United States. For the US, Sarah did the plays *Phedre*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Hernani*, *Froufrou*, and *fil's La Dame aux camelias*. The tour thankfully brought in a great amount of money to the company and to Sarah.

In the beginning of 1882, Sarah met Greek army officer Aristidis Damala. They hit it off and got married at Saint Andrew's in London at the end of Sarah's tour through Italy, Greece, Hungary, Austria, Sweden. England, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, and Russia. Italy's King Umberto gifted her an elegant Venetian fan and Alfonso XII of Spain gifted her a diamond brooch. After the performance of *Phedre* that followed the wedding, Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph gifted her with an antique cameo necklace.

Sarah bought the Theatre de l'Ambigu in 1882 in the name of her son, Maurice, who became director of the theatre. It became a financial and managerial disaster. Playwright Victorien Sardou wrote melodramatic plays and offered them to Sarah. He wrote *Fedora* in 1882, *Theodora* in 1884, and *La Tosca* in 1887. Although she was the highest paying actress of the time, most of her money went to the mass amount of debt the theatre brought. Maurice eventually gave up the director position and Sarah leased the Porte Saint-Martin, a theatre with 1800 seats. Even though the performances of *Froufrou* and *La Dame aux camelias* were successful, the newest play written for her, *Nana Sahib*, was an absolute failure. She returned to performing *La Dame aux camelias*, a fan favorite, to try and save her theatre from financial ruin.

September of 1884 is when Sarah began collaboration with Felix Duquesnel as the new director of Porte Saint-Martin, with Sardou coming on as the theatre's in house playwright. Their collaboration was a huge success. The most popular production was *Theodora*. The play opened on Dec. 26, 1884 and was performed 300 times in Paris and over 100 times in London in the years 1885 and 1886. Summer of 1887, Sarah returned to the theatre from a tour in the Americas and announced to friends, family, and collaborators that the tour made her a millionaire.

Also in 1887, Maurice married Princess Marie-Therese Jablonowska of the infamous Polish family. Two years later, Sarah's husband died of morphine overdose. Only a handful of months after the death was the birth of Maurice and Marie's daughter, Simone, making Sarah a new grandmother. Two months after becoming a grandmother, Sarah asked Duquesnel to direct her in *Le Proces de Jeanne d'Arc*, written by Emile Moreau. Sarah played the lead, a 19-year-old virgin. With this role, Sarah took back her honorable status of leading lady after being painted as a vicious queen, prostitute, and someone with no morals. The play was a hit! It unfortunately had to close after 16 weeks due to Sarah's constantly having to fall on her knees.

1891 is the year Sarah went on a world tour, one that brought in lots of funds. She was rehearsing Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in the summer of 1892 when she was interrupted by Lord Chamberlain. He refused to let the show performed in England. Sarah just went about her tour. One year later, Sarah decided to sell the Port Saint-Martin theatre to buy the Theatre de la Renaissance. In that space she could produce and perform in smaller production to have a more intimate relationship with the audience. She returned to France as the richest and most known actress, with a net worth of 3.5 million.

The next five years after buying the Theatre de la Renaissance were very experimental. Sarah collaborated on new plays with young writers and had a great time! Some of the plays were *Les Rois* by Jules Lemaitre and *Les Mauvais Bergers* by Octave Mirabeau. Working with Edmond Rostand on his play *La Princesse Ionitine*, Sarah became fascinated with contemporary symbolist theatre.

In the year 1897, Sarah arranged to produce and star in *La Ville Morte* by Gabriel D'Annunzio, who just so happened to be Eleanora Duse's lover. Sarah knew that. However, following that performance was struggle for Sarah's theatre. Over the next year the theatre gathered debts summing up at 2 million. Two years later, Sarah signed a 25-year lease for the Theatre des Nations at Chatelet to try and avoid any further financial hardship. The theatre was beautifully built, offering Sarah to be at a safer distance from the audience. She renamed the theatre, Theatre Sarah Bernhardt. Sarah opened the theatre with *La Tosca*, a revival performance. The next production was *Hamlet*, but was controversial because Sarah was the leading character, Hamlet. 1900 brought the theatre much success. Sarah played the role of Napoleon's 17-year-old son, Duc de Reichstadt, in *L'Aiglon*. She performed the show 250 consecutive times, earning her much respect.

The year 1905 was a year of change for Sarah. She went on a tour in America. In the last performance of *La Tosca* in Rio there was an accident which led to having to unfortunately amputate her right leg 10 years later. The next March, Sarah performed under a huge tent that seated 5,000 audience members in Kansas City, Missouri and in Dallas and Waco, Texas. She continued her tour around the globe, going to Canada, Brazil, Russia, and Ireland. In 1908 Sarah broke into motion pictures and short films. Her first was a two-minute film, *Le Duel d'Hamlet*. What helped her success as an international celebrity was her role of Elizabeth the First in the silent film *The Loves of Queen Elizabeth*.

Sarah visited French soldiers on the front lines of World War 1 and participated in a propaganda film, *Les Mères françaises*. Soon after that visit, Sarah departed for her last American tour which lasted about 18 months. At performances she would urge the Americans to join the Allies. In 1922, Sarah had a benefit performance to raise money for Madame Curie's laboratory, performing in *Regine Armand* by Verneuil. That performance at the benefit eventually helped land her a lead role in *La Voyante*, a film in Hollywood by Sacha Guitry. Shortly after the film, roughly a few weeks, Sarah Bernhardt passed on March 26, 1923 of uremia.

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