

Recent Sarah Bernhardt biography is simply Divine

by Riccardo Sala

"Nothing kills but death," Sarah Bernhardt once said. For the legendary French actress who had played countless death scenes on the stage, few things came easier than survival.

The Divine Sarah deals with this very adaptable woman. Her performances were works of art that through their intensity and artistry transcended the physical limits of the stage to singe themselves upon the consciousness of the larger society.

Unlike so many famous artists and actors of later generations, Sarah didn't burn out. She lived contentedly until close to 80, nurtured by the theatre to which she contributed so much.

Fizdale and Gold's work does not swamp the reader with arcane tidbits of theatre. Like a social history, it illustrates the life of a well-known figure, Sarah Bernhardt, and her relationship to society.

Amplified with photos and a section devoted to art icons fashioned after Bernhardt, this work shows the powerful had she held upon the popular imagination. Even now, over one hundred years after she entered the stage, the photographs remain as vivid today as ever: Bernhardt as Marguerite in Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias*,



Sarah Bernhardt strikes a pose on the stage in the title role of Sardou's *Theodora*. Although remembered as a too demonstrative actress, Bernhardt was actually restrained compared to other stage performers of her day according to *The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt*, a new biography written by Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale.

as the empress of Byzantium in Sardou's *Theodora*, as Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Like the tragic, romantic heroines she played, Sarah lived a role that was larger than life. Everything about her was grandiose: her lovers, her adventures, her ambition.

The fame that surrounded Sarah at the end of her life was a far cry from her early days, when she was kicked out of the Comedie Francaise, the country's leading theatre company.

"With nothing to do, Sarah was frustrated, bored, and miserably uncomfortable in a company where ev-

eryone disliked her. Since she reputedly refused to apologize, her contract was terminated. Imprudent, stubborn Sarah, her amour propre intact, was not to return to the Comedie Francaise for 10 years," the authors write.

In leaving the Comedie, Bernhardt turned her back on the centre of France's theatrical universe. When she returned to the Comedie a decade later, she did so as a vastly different person.

In the intervening years she supported herself as a small-time actress as well as a courtesan, developing a manner and confidence that would add to her later stage personae.

When the Germans encircled Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, Bernhardt worked as a nurse, tending after wounded French soldiers.

Before the war, she had found work at the Theatre Odeon under Felix Duquesnel, and returned there as soon as peace returned. The Odeon could not compare with the Comedie Francaise, though, so when the Comedie asked Bernhardt, by then a well-known actress, to come back, she accepted.

"It was a different Sarah who returned to the Comedie Francaise after a 10 year absence. At 17 she had been an unknown girl, plagued by uncontrollable stage fright. Now, at 28, she was an accomplished actress who fascinated theatre-goers with her insinuating charm and arrogant chic."

As the authors describe her, Bernhardt had a unique ability to interact with the audience. She drew

BOOK

The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt
by Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale
published by Alfred A. Knopf/Random House
353 pages

upon a reserve of intensity unparalleled in the theatre. Time and again, Bernhardt conquered unreceptive audiences, challenging them, converting them with her acting and a voice that critic Francisque Sarcey described as an "Aeolian harp."

Bernhardt outgrew the Comedie Francaise and went on to form her own company with which she toured the world. Whenever debts threatened her in Paris, Bernhardt took her show on the road, guaranteeing more than enough to cover expenses at home. With shades of our own rock heroes, Bernhardt eventually staged three farewell tours of the United States.

Through it all Sarah Bernhardt redefined acting, bringing to the stage an understated intensity that was in marked contrast to the hyperbole of the Comedie Francaise.

Writing about the attempt earlier in this century to transcribe *Oedipus* onto film, the authors make an interesting point about Jean Mounet-Sully of the Comedie Francaise, one of Bernhardt's lovers when she was still with the troupe:

"The tragedian had not changed his ways. Still reluctant to take direction, he refused to adapt himself to the new medium, with the result that he appears as a mouthing frenzied madman, a silent parody of Comedie Francaise declamation."

According to the authors, Bernhardt was a more congenial film subject.

By the time the twentieth century rolled around, Bernhardt was 50 years old and enjoying unparalleled fame. But there were signs of change on the horizon.

The romantic plays upon which Bernhardt had built her repertoire were being superseded by the northern-bred, psychological dramas of Ibsen and Chekhov, authors whose anguished, negative view of society found little receptiveness with the vivacious Bernhardt.

She was being edged out by a new generation of actresses, in comparison with whom Bernhardt was now being called overstated. Once alone at the top of the ladder, Bernhardt had to make room for actresses such as the Italian Eleanora Duse, whose forte lay precisely in the new Ibsenesque dramas Bernhardt neglected.

Travel book neither this nor that

by Jim Munroe

Neither Here Nor There recounts Bill Bryson's experiences travelling through Europe. While nothing special in themselves, his cynical and occasionally witty style makes his tourist rambles slightly (although not much) more interesting than they should be.

Bryson travelled as a young man, with a backpack and a hitchhiking thumb. Interspersed with his descriptions of his modern travels are his memories of those days. These parts are outrageously funny, and mercifully without the inept moralizing which mars the rest of the book. While these episodes may have been intended as a counterpoint to his more reserved modern travels, they end up being a much better read.

In his recent travels, Bryson hits the traditional European spots like Paris, Rome and the like, but he also

BOOK

Neither Here Nor There
written by Bill Bryson
published by Secker & Warburg

voyages into Finland, Yugoslavia and Istanbul. A chapter devoted to each place, the book cannot help but become somewhat predictable after the sixth or seventh — he arrives, finds a hotel and spends the remainder of his time hitting the tourist traps and remarking on the architecture.

Bryson is an American who has lived in England for over a decade. He is quite obviously writing for a British audience; his humour is influenced by the dry wit of his adopted home. However, he still retains an unmistakable American arrogance.

This results in a strangely skewed world-view. On the one hand, Bryson condemns the American way of life. On the other, he continually criticizes other places for not being American

enough.

Bryson's chosen topics range from the silly to the inane. He laments the fact that the Walkman was invented in Japan, for instance. It would have been far better named had it been made in America, he spouts, making a snide remark along the lines of, "But what do you expect — they're boring Japanese!" This impassioned love of compartmentalizing people, be it Serbians or British, is often too offensive and simple-minded to be funny, and detracts enormously from the book.

From its witty opening, the book, like Bryson's enthusiasm, tends to degenerate steadily. Aside from a few bright spots, the writing is lacklustre after the first quarter.

Worst of all is his satisfaction with playing the consummate tourist. Bryson frequents the typical points of interest, complains about the coffee and sits alone in bars where he gets drunk and reads history books. Not exactly inspirational reading for people interested in travel.

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE TRAVELS IN EUROPE



An entertaining comic novel, and that's no lie

by Ira Nayman

Stephen Fry's first novel, *The Liar* sat around the *Excilbur* offices for over a month with no takers. Who wants to read another first novel by an unknown British writer? However, over Christmas, I decided I had the time to give the comic novel a try.

My first surprise was to find that I actually know who Stephen Fry is: as an actor, he appeared in the hilariously rude British series *Blackadder*. There was no reason to believe that, just because Fry was a wonderful comic actor, he would be equally adept at writing.

But, it was enough to make me sorry that his book had sat around the newspaper office for so long.

The Liar is very British: boy's schools with masters ranging from unbearably stupid to unbearably smart and sympathetic, the usual homosexual flirtations and flings, etc. etc. It's a bit too familiar, even for someone

BOOK

The Liar
written by Stephen Fry
published by The Octopus Publishing Group
277 pages

like myself who has never been to England. Once you get past that, however, *The Liar* is a light, funny read.

The title character, Adrian Healey, is a chronic liar, a person who lies for the hell of it, even when there is no benefit in it for him. While the chapters of his life at boy's school are necessary to develop his character, they can become somewhat tedious.

The book picks up when he gets involved with a mysterious professor of languages, Donald Trefusis, at college. Trefusis takes Healey, and the reader, on a wild adventure involving spies and a machine known as Mendax.

Fry isn't a half-bad writer. A comic set piece in which the fate of Trefusis,

who has been arrested on a morals charge (in service of the story, you may be sure), is discussed by the senior faculty members is hilarious.

Once the plot gets moving, the reader has a hard time keeping track of what's real and what isn't. And, Fry has an interesting take on what all those spies are going to be doing now that the Cold War has been called off.

Unfortunately, chapters with scenes from the present are mixed with chapters on the past. Not only is this confusing early on, but it tends to slow the action and humour just as it gets started.

All in all, Stephen Fry comes across as Douglas Adams lite, taking his characters a little more seriously, not being able to sustain his humour quite so much. That's not bad for a first novel (especially since Adams seems to have abdicated for a life of environmentally conscious travel book writing); I look forward with interest to what he comes up with next.