

The Devine Sarah

By Barrie Renwick

Amid the horrors and destruction of war around them, many French people took respite during the government's gala in 1944 that commemorated the *centenaire* of the birth of Sarah Bernhardt, their country's world-famous theatrical artist, beloved citizen, and quasi-ambassador for France.

Sarah, born an illegitimate a hundred years before, had endured a dreary childhood. Her mother Julie, a Parisian *cocotte*, a dependent on the aegis of her distinguished men. "Julie," Youle live by her wits. Part of the remained either unknown or never with little Sarah who, supported of life mostly in a series of foster



Eventually Julie realized Sarah began her learning in a sent to the school of a Catholic

asked for baptism and was received into the Roman Catholic faith. When her schooling finished, Sarah was confronted by her mother with the reality that Julie's monetary support for her had now ended and Sarah would have to find her own way, either by marrying or by working. She rejected the thought of marriage, though pondered the alternative. A suggestion to join "the theatre" seemingly offered her a tolerable lifestyle, and it could replace the personal support she was losing. Sarah felt that with the experience she had gained from appearing in school theatrical productions that she might succeed. So she consented, and that led this unsure teenager to her somewhat erratic beginning as a theatrical performer.

Sarah had struggled through her fledgling years in learning acting, had faltered, and often when frustrated, lashed out in theatre at perceived annoyances. Theatres in those times provided junior members only the barest living standard. Bernhardt being almost penniless had to suppress her faults in order to succeed or lose her livelihood; for her there was no alternative. Eventually she did overcome her plight, and then strode toward the peak of success she achieved and held during her long career. Sarah's talent and her persona overshadowed her ongoing social peccadilloes and indiscretions that otherwise might have distanced her supporters; as her personal motto, *Quand meme*, says: "Despite everything."

From Sarah's initiation into her first theatre company in 1860 her progress was mediocre. It languished then withered. Later, after she left to join another company, her stage presence began to flourish, and by 1870 she had earned recognition as a rising star.

Mlle Sarah was staunchly patriotic and egalitarian. As an individual she relished her ego by dressing and behaving in a flamboyant fashion. She had a gregarious personality. Her affection-starved childhood may have caused her most obvious foible, the forever helpless

attraction to intimate dalliances with gentlemen associated with, or supporters of, the performing arts. This very addiction produced her illegitimate son, Maurice, whose father still remains anonymous. She adored her child and defied social norms by flaunting him openly throughout her lifetime. Oddly, her social indiscretions during her career brought her less grief from detractors than the vile anti-Semitic slurs she sometimes endured. Shamefully for Canadians, among the worst of those vilifications were outbursts she faced publicly in Montreal, during performance tours.

By 1880 Sarah's career was secure; she had her own theatre in Paris, her own company of actors and together they embarked on lengthy tours, some lasting up to a year. In their repertoire were classic plays, dramas, and comedies. Over time there were tours throughout Europe, in Russia, many in Britain and more to Australasia, parts of Africa, and multiple tours throughout North America and South America. For example, Sarah made nine tours of the United States and several that included Canada. At home she was adored as The Devine Sarah by her countrymen; abroad her admirers called her Madame Sarah. Her name was recognized almost everywhere, and fame brought her wealth. What's surprising is she had very little command of English and always spoke French while acting. Despite this, Sarah's appearances abroad were tremendously successful and they continued so for many years. Non-francophone theatre patrons in that era were familiar with the plays, and they used transcriptions of the dialog to fully enjoy performances. Sarah was considered the undisputed reigning superstar. Many today still regard her as the most famous actress in the world.

As Sarah aged beyond seventy, a nagging incurable knee infection from an old injury became intolerable, and in 1915 she had her right leg amputated. Recovery was long and painful. Remarkably, she continued after as a performer, standing or positioned to distract attention to her missing limb. Even with her age and her handicap her acting ability remained impressive and patrons still flocked to her performances. Sarah's last appearance was in 1922 when her declining health ended her four decades of stardom. She died the following year in Paris, mourned by hundreds of thousands.

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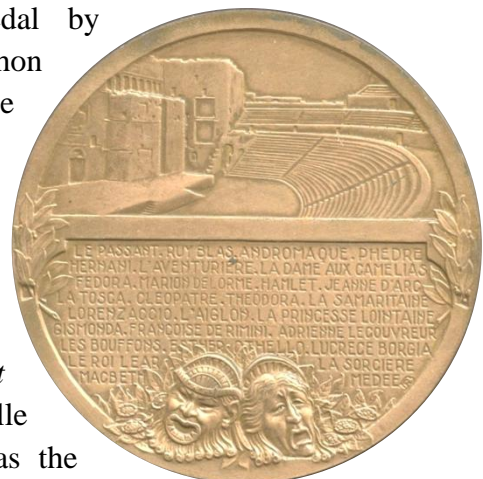
To celebrate, there were Bernhardt centenary souvenirs, and among them we have two items of

collectors' interest: a medal by sculptor René Baudichon and a French postage stamp attributed to engraver Charles Mazelin, but first, the medal:



Baudichon's medal:
Sarah Bernhardt
1844–1923 shows Mlle

Sarah, at about age 35, as the



idyllic mistress of the theatrical stage. This portrait, based on Jules Bastien-Lepage's 1879 eponymous painting, differs slightly in its fine details from Bastien-Lepage's work. In Baudichon's portrayal, he opted to open Sarah's eyes, purse her lips, soften her oft-called "Jewish" nose and tame the appearance of her hair. In the painting her gown is a flamboyant high-collared confection typical of her tastes. Baudichon maintained its *belle-époque* style in his rendition, but he scaled the frock to be less prominent as a way to emphasize the beauty of her face. That and his skilled use of portrait relief make her image into a pleasing likeness, on a medal of 63 mm in size.

René Baudichon (1878–1963) a French sculptor and medallist may have actually seen Sarah and used those memories to replicate her image on this medal. Nevertheless, his skilled interpretation of the Bastien-Lepage portrait of her retains that painting's iconic pose but changes Sarah's facial expression into one of open awareness, in keeping with the medal's theme.

The medal's reverse has a bi-part design; the bold border and its bar across enclose the two semi-circles. The upper one portrays an ancient Greek *theatron* or viewing place, symbolic of theatrical performing. The lower one, inscribed with nine lines, has the names of notable plays in which Sarah Bernhardt frequently appeared. These inscriptions are flanked each side by a bough of laurel leaves to signify her theatrical successes. At the bottom are the elaborate face masks of Comedy and Tragedy typifying Sarah's ability of acting in either role.

As for the postage stamp, the government of newly-liberated France honoured Sarah's memory by commissioning a 4-franc and replicates Bastien-Lepage's stamps had a 1-franc surcharge actors in need. A competition for engraver Pierre Gandon (1899–discovered belatedly, had been the engraving was attributed to Bernhardt's was the first real French postage stamps.



stamp in 1944. The stamp attributes 1879 oil portrait of Sarah. Such to form a benefit fund for retired the stamp design was won by the 1990), who the government politically ineligible to compete, so his assistant, Charles Mazelin. female image to appear alone on

The 1879 oil painting, *Sarah Bernhardt* by French realist painter Jules Bastien-Lepage is sized 42 x 32 inches and is in a private collection. Bastien-Lepage received France's cross of the Legion of Honour in recognition of his painting.



Images: the stamp – Google; the painting – Art Renewal Center

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* Sarah modified the spelling of her birth surname.