Sarah Bernhardt's Dramatic Life, Onstage And Off

by Glenn C. Altschuler

Mark Twain once identified five kinds of actresses: "bad actresses, fair actresses, good actresses, great actresses — and then there is Sarah Bernhardt." Bernhardt was, indeed, one of a kind. From her debut onstage, in 1862, in the title role of Racine's Iphigenia, to her death in 1923, she was a sensational success. A favorite of counts, couturiers and commoners in France, she brought Americans to their feet during nine tours, even though she spoke a language most of them did not understand.

She played 19-year-old Joan of Arc when she was 46, and was credible in many male roles, including Hamlet. She kept a coffin in her bedroom, and on at least one occasion, slept in it. Throughout World War I, she performed for soldiers, even though her leg had been amputated. No wonder then, her tombstone merely read, "Sarah Bernhardt."
In *Sarah*, Robert Gottlieb, a legendary editor and the biographer of George Balanchine, provides an elegant and engaging portrait worthy of Bernhardt. Separating myth and misrepresentation (Bernhardt lied a lot) from fact, he shows how she morphed from a figure of scandal, as the fatherless daughter of a Jewish courtesan, who was promiscuous herself (Bernhardt started an affair with Victor Hugo when he was 70 and she was 27), into a magnificent artist — and then into a symbol of, and ambassador for, France.

Robert Gottlieb has served as editor-in-chief at both Alfred A. Knopf and Simon & Schuster. He was the editor of *The New Yorker* from 1987 to 1992.

Gottlieb attributes Bernhardt’s "special allure" to her exaggerated thinness, exotic face, and the charm (and perfect articulation) of a rather weak voice. Even more importantly, he points out, as a child of the Romantic Age she revealed a "touch of hysteria, perhaps even danger, in her willingness to expose her emotions, to impose them on her audience."

Bernhardt, Gottlieb acknowledges, had her detractors. Chekhov found that her "enchantment is smothered in artifice." George Bernard Shaw dismissed her as a "worn out hack tragedienne." And in the 20th century, her exaggerated gestures didn’t play well on the silver screen.

It didn’t really matter. On March 26, 1923, Gottlieb tells us, in a touching conclusion to a terrific book, when the news of her death reached the theater that bore her name, during the first act of *L’Aiglon*, the curtain went down, the audience quietly filed out, and the actors, still in costume and makeup, walked to her house to bid her adieu. For once, for "The Divine Sarah," the show did not go on.