

Bernhardt, Sarah

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Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923)

Actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) photographed in 1882.

Unknown photographer: Sarah Bernhardt dans "Fedora", drame de Victorien Sardou, black-and-white photograph, Paris, 1882; source: Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-ICOPER-2369 (7),

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84387728/f47.item.r=Bernhardt,%20Sarah>.

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Bernhardt, *Sarah* Henriette Rosine Bernard

French actress

Born 23 October 1844 in Paris, France

Died 26 March 1923 in Paris, France

Summary

Sarah Bernhardt was a French actress. During the war, she showed great commitment to the patriotic cause through her participation in performances at the front, appearance in propaganda productions and the campaign urging the United States to enter the war.

Table of contents

[1 During World War One](#)

[2 At the Front](#)

3 In the United States

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Citation

During World War One

In 1914, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was a world-famous actress who had performed in public and private theatres in Paris, managed several of them and toured extensively. Her “golden voice”¹, as [Victor Hugo \(1802-1885\)](#) termed it, still served her but, at the age of seventy, she was in poor health (she eventually died of kidney failure) and gangrene had developed in one of her legs (it was amputated in 1915).

After spending the first part of the war resting at her property in Belle-Isle, she resumed acting. In *Mères françaises* – directed by [Louis Mercanton \(1879-1932\)](#), released in 1917- she played a mother who lost her son in the trenches. The movie was filmed at the front and endorsed by the Ministry of War. She also premiered two plays with a patriotic content: *Les cathédrales* (1915) and *Du théâtre au champ d'honneur* (1916).

At the Front

As proof of her commitment to the patriotic cause, not only did Bernhardt appear in artistic productions that celebrated French heroism but she [performed for soldiers at the front](#) in 1916. Although witnesses attested to the rousing power of her voice, a fundamental disconnect between the actress and her public remained. She once declared after a performance with the *Théâtre aux Armées*, “I would have wanted to die there, among them, so fraternal, so heroic, so gay, so joyous, so simply French!” but soldiers were dismissive of the moral lessons dispensed by the rear and mocked the vaunted courage of civilian actors.²

In the United States

Between September 1916 and November 1918, Bernhardt toured the [United States](#). Her motivations for this trip were not just financial: she was campaigning to convince the United States to enter the war.

Bernhardt maintained her activity after the war. Despite her declining popularity and deteriorating health, she continued to perform, gave public lectures and wrote novels.

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Notes

1. Taranow, Gerda: Sarah Bernhardt: The Art Within the Legend, Princeton 1972, p. 25. [↑](#)
2. Winograd, Annabelle: Ten Minutes of Anthrax!: Some Notes on French Combatant Trench Scripts of the First World War, in: Theater 31/1 (2001), pp. 61-62. [↑](#)

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- [Dussane, Béatrix: **Reines de théâtre, 1633-1941**, Lyon, 1944: H. Lardanchet.](#)
- [Martin-Fugier, Anne: **Comédienne. De Mlle Mars à Sarah Bernhardt**, Paris, 2001: Seuil.](#)
- [Picon, Sophie-Aude: **Sarah Bernhardt**, Paris, 2010: Gallimard.](#)
- [Roberts, Mary Louise: **Disruptive acts. The new woman in fin-de-siècle France**, Chicago, 2002: The University of Chicago Press.](#)

Citation

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External Links

- [Bernhardt, Sarah: **Du théâtre au champ d'honneur: pièce en un acte**, London 1916 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Bernhardt, Sarah: **My double life, the memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt**, London 1907 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Funeral Of Sarah Bernhardt - Paris 1923 \(British Pathé\) \(Video\)](#)

- [Morand, Eugène: Les cathédrales; poème dramatique créé par Madame Sarah Bernhardt, Paris 1915 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Russell, R. H.: Sarah Bernhardt, her artistic life, New York 1901 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Sarah Bernhardt 1915 \(British Pathé\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Sarah Bernhardt \(Encyclopædia Britannica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sarah Bernhardt Posters \(Mucha Foundation\) \(Database\)](#)

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