

Dr. Richard Schoch

Performance in History

Dmitry Tolonen, Year One  
Sarah Bernhardt at the Gaiety 2/6/1879

'Dear Diary,

Forgive me for keeping you waiting. But now we're alone at last. They have left us alone to be acquainted. That is my sister and her husband Nellie and John MacEvoy. And let me introduce myself - my name is Charlotte O'Brien. Each year on the Twenty-fourth of May, for some time now, I have received a brand new diary on my Birthday. How special, you say, a new diary in mid-summer! So say I - I believe they think it's good for one to foster the arts, like writing and knitting even! I must confess, it's hard, having recently moved here from Dublin, to still be treated like 'the Little sister' - After all I am nineteen and have my own job. And to think that this happens in 1879!

I teach the Piano at a girls' school here in Lambeth, not far from John and Nellie's Beautiful house near the Thames. They bought the house after moving here because as John says 'people of respectable position shouldn't live in such unhealthy conditions as the City - especially children.' He told me the River reaked of dead rats until lately or Maybe that's just John's horror tales.

Anyway, I like the work - it's something I can do and earn my keep. But it's hard work. I earn about 7 shillings a week. As much as I love the children, they just can't manage to play a correct tune between them. It must be the nuns teaching them - they

are far too eager to scold them for forgetting modesty and not concentrating on calculus. I suppose this is the best option Father and Mother thought of, since I haven't married yet - although they took a hard thinking over sending me to London, of all places. Nellie's assurance that she'd make me in to a proper woman left them at ease - see I guess I'm a bit of a handful. But, now, just see what Nellie's achieved!

"Hel-lo! Are you ho-me?!"

"One moment, I 'm coming!"

"That was Sinead, Nellie's little daughter. I must go and prepare her meal, since Nellie and John are at the Lyceum Theatre. I am always staying home, because in their minds it still is not suitable for me to go out on my own. But I hunger for excitement. Yes, it is nice and peaceful here, but it is so terribly frustrating! I want to dare! So, things are going to change for me. I have ordered a ticket for myself (just the one!) to see the 'Comedie Francaise' when they come to London.

They are going to perform a series of French plays, but the real reason of my interest is one of the actresses - Sarah Bernhardt. I have heard so much about her. It will turn out to be a very popular season - there have already been Many Requests concerning tickets. The performance is also to be in a theatre that is. Opposed to Nellie's theatre, as far as style (or reputation) of the establishment is Concerned - I do not wish to upset my sister, but a little sign of my age wouldn't do Her harm.

Initially, I told Nellie that it was going to be a matinee Show. to improve my French - all purely in the interest of study, of course! I then Informed Her that in fact a mistake had been made, it was to be an evening-show, but nevertheless a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see this celebrated 'star'. And, after much consideration, they both

consented, making me promise that I'd use a carriage throughout my trip there and back. My plan had worked.

I booked my ticket in the Upper Boxes, which. at 5s (for the cheaper ones and 7s 6d for the more expensive ones) was still rather a lot, but after all - I have long been saving up for something 'spectacular'. I'll tell you about it later.'

'Dear Diary,

Monday was my big night. I was reading the Daily News that morning. There was An article about the Comedie Francaise, but unfortunately very little about Sarah Bernhardt, as little as apparently was seen of her in Folkestone on Saturday. They seemed to have an amazing array of belongings of the company - eighty-five heads Altogether - with them and ninety-eight big cases in all, of properties and dresses even - and they had their own servants and dressers with them.

I was preparing to go out. John was going to arrange for a carriage to be sent to our House. The carriage arrived at six o'clock. This was a good time, since I wanted to arrive a bit early to have a walk along the Strand. I said goodbye to Nellie and John and promised to be back early from the play. I wanted also to have a passing look at Covent Garden on my way to the Theatre.

After nearly a half an hour, I got off the carriage at Charing Cross Station. This was the bustle of the city, finally. The people were fashionable and smart. I couldn't believe my eyes. This was really different from something Lambeth, where so many still toiled with the industry, and how different again would this seem from Dublin for its sheer size. If I once went into this stream of People, no one would ever find me

again. But I did. I had completely forgotten about my engagement later in the evening; it would have been enough to stroll amongst the colours of the Strand and study people.

Luckily I remembered Covent Garden and the Lyceum, which after all was a grand Theatre. I walked along the Strand, still, passing the Adelphi, where they were putting on some sort of comedy. All in all, it didn't seem to have the same sort of fascination that my destination did. Turning to Southhampton Street, I proceeded to make my visit to Covent Garden a brief one and passing some flower-girls, I went around down to Burleigh St. - where, once, you could hear exotic animals - and back onto the Strand.

Approaching the front of the theatre-house, I stopped to gaze at the block between Wellington and Catherine street. It surely is a sight to be reckoned with. The thin Façade of the building, which I'm told (by some gentlemen) is a 'hidden pearl of Theatre', is like from a fairy-tale far away. I knew instantly, that I had come to the Right theatre. But I was curious to see more of this before I went in. And after all, I had come some time early, so I decided to walk around the building - as the doors had just been opened and there was half an hour until the play.

I went round to Catherine St., and noticed several other entrances. I entered the 'Pit' entrance. Opening the door, I could hear a roar of voices and sounds sounds of people moving Around and engaging in excited discussion - about what I don't know. They were Mostly young men, most of them well-dressed and quite eager, seemingly, to make The acquaintance of a new face." Excuse me, miss," one said with a sparkle in his eye, "may I be of assistance in finding you a seat?"

There seemed to be no place for peace in this area .But the sight above was stunning. Above these plush armchairs and the benches behind them was first the most Magnificent balcony one ever saw. It's semicircular front opened up from the Centre to reaching far out. It was every bit as elaborately decorated, as I had imagined, with A pattern running across it.

There were the faces of young ladies just to be seen Resting on their arms. Behind were private boxes separated from the balcony, which Had separate entrances for each of them and were furnished with curtains. Yet above Were the upper boxes and the Gallery, from both of which one had a splendid view Of the art work of the ceiling all bathed in the brilliant shimmering of thousands of Lights and of the grand audience, which I hear could be as large as two thousand, no Less.

Again, I gaze upon the ladies on the balcony. They look beautiful in their dresses and more Refined than I, or the women around me. I decided to turn out and in doing that Noticed that I'd neglected the most important of all - the stage! It felt very near though strongly cut off from the audience. It's proscenium arch had a very decorative Frieze over it with a King and a Queen watching a Masque being performed.

The act drop depicted an Italian Villa which,I overheard,was part of the theatre's own decoration. But, I had to hurry - It was time to get to my place.

Back at the main entrance, six electrical lights lit my way in.I made my way through the door. As I turned towards the Strand before going in, I Felt cheered up by the mere business of the crowds of people and horse-carriages and Elegantly dressed ladies about. There is a vast restaurant on the 1st floor for the play-Goers to have supper after

the plays, should they want to. The whole place is very Impressive. After picking up my tickets, I went in and up the octangular staircase to Find my place above. As I got there, I noticed those ladies right beneath me, and the The Stage!

The Audience grew silent on the dimming of the lights. The French Comedie were To perform from three plays today. The first, according to the programme, was one I knew nothing of, it was called 'Le Misanthrope' . I enjoyed the comedy, but grew Slightly impatient waiting for the next one to begin - it was what I had been waiting For, the second act played out from Racine's 'Phedre'.

We were all captivated from The very first moment Sarah Bernhardt came on stage. At moments, I had some difficulty seeing, so I would had to guess what was happening. one thing I remember very Vividly. It was the moment Bernhardt came walking on, in her long, white Dress and veil, with cameos fastened around her waist, with the weight darkest secrets. It left an instantly striking impression on me. The white colour, that of innocence!

She couldn't have acted the part with more sincerity, when looking at Hippolytus she says : "J'oublie..."! I felt a terrifying shudder on that moment as if all the audience and cast had Momentarily ceased to exist , only Phedre and I facing each other in terror of the Positions we were in. From the very start she had struck such an distressing note, that she must have been in pain herself as was her character. I couldn't help my tears. There was a standing ovation for when M Mounet-Sully escorted Madme Bernhardt to receive the applause. After this we were thoroughly entertained by the very short but funny 'Les Precieuses Ridicules' by Moliere, though the audience was getting a bit restless

No wonder, I say, after such a powerful display of tragedy! On my way out, while trying to get through the masses of people, which were tremendous, I felt unhappy that nothing more exciting had happened on this side of the stage, as perhaps I had assumed would. But, that evaporated once I remembered what I had just seen, something larger than the everyday, on-goings of Lambeth and the dangers of the City. It seemed like I had truly reached the new threshold of my life that I had so wanted to get to, although I couldn't as yet put a name to it. Something had struck me.

As I walked out of the Gaiety Theatre, and out on to the Strand, to find a carriage in the darkening night of London, I kept reminiscing on the powerful image of Sarah Bernhardt and her shining white veil and how dramatic all of this had been on .

How The whole company had acted with talent and how the smell of the smoking-room had had its curious lure. And how wonderful the whole experience had been. In short, I had completely forgotten about the outer world, and any reasons that had placed me into an environment so secluded from reality'. But I only wish it were reality

. It is conceivable that something like a partial, truncated version of the experience as depicted in pt.I of the essay could happen. One of the main problems is that although all the basic elements here are still strongly valid; stardom and its myths, growing up, liberty and sexuality, iconoclasm (of Sarah Bernhardt or 'Charlotte' to traditions eg. Of reality/fiction, family etc.) - the World of today is far more cynical and splintered for such a singular experience to make such a huge impact. The late first Gaiety Theatre was a place which liked to fulfil its promises of spectacular programming. It was, of

the music-halls and theatres with somewhat ambiguous natures, one of, if not the most successful in providing a complete experience of variety and extravaganza (using the terms loosely). The first manager, journalist John Hollingshead, was an enthusiastic figure in the 19th century fight for a free stage in London.

On opening, in 1868, it was hailed as a forerunner on many a field; it was a very large theatre - it housed around 2000, it was the first public building to light the strand by electricity, matinees were introduced there as standard procedure in 1871, it was one of the most luxurious theatres around, it offered a wide scale of entertainment and it housed a restaurant under the same roof. It subsequently went through more developments until being demolished from under the new Strand-Aldwych redevelopment scheme, only to be re-built anew, in the age of the musical comedy, to be closed down at the beginning of the second world war. A brave new building now stands on the site of the second Gaiety - the Citibank House. A lot of writing about Sarah Bernhardt has to do with either dramatic and stylistic questions regarding her romantic-melodramatic acting or then the overflowing of the antecedent into her real life, as if these had categorically to be separate entities.

Little has been written about the interrelation of these and where we have texts, they read a lot like Bernhardt's acting: nostalgic and romantic (as with regard to 'a lost treasure') Indeed here criticism often begs the question: what is this aimed at, specifically? The critics, instead of (or as well as) writing of a new genius, should, more interestingly, write about a new genius. Where, one ponders, are the 'post-modern' studies of this actresses existence on the planes of reality and fiction?

The French season of 1879 at the Gaiety was a real success. In a period of just under

six weeks, the Comedie Francaise had managed to establish itself in London, making £19,685 19s.6d. Bernhardt, in a case of C19th pre-publicity hype, had made herself even more so. They as a group performed from a selection of about 40 French plays, in acts or as whole plays. But one night had to stand out from the rest, and that was June 2nd, the opening night. And, Sarah Bernhardt had come to dominate the measure of success of the season.

Prices for 'Bernhardt-nights' yielding more than other nights, places being sold at much higher prices and the Press being nearly entirely enamoured of her, Punch named her 'Seductive Sarah';

Mistress of Hearts and Arts, all met in you!  
The picturesque, informed by soul of passion!  
Say, doest thou feed on milk and honeydew,  
Draining from goblets deep of classic fashion  
Champagne and nectar, shandy-gaff sublime...

To play the title role in Racine's 'Phedre', is to be challenged at the highest level. It is considered one of the most difficult parts in all French Theatre. But Sarah Bernhardt wouldn't be put off by that. She had played the part before, and although she knew she'd have to face up to extremely high expectations within a tradition of Comedie Francaise actresses, with Rachel (Felix) being the last to charm London, at Covent Garden. She would have to do better.

An iconoclast feature shows in the difference that Bernhardts performance has in contrast to the rest of the Comedie, as well as the precious Phedres. The critic for The Times contrasted her with Rachel: "Her Phedre might be more terrible and intense , but it was, perhaps, less womanlike, less entrainante than the Phedre of Sarah Bernhardt...." What is usually meant by this is the more desperate, psychological,

as well as gesturally romantic acting, which broke from the traditional classical acting so particular to the Comedie Francaise.

Although this is a historically important influence on acting, later influencing, unwittingly, the arrival alternative theatres such as those of those of the symbolist, naturalist and surrealist directions., these kinds of comments tell us about the theatrical boundaries and artistic conventions of the time. This doesn't mean we should let a performance go, as if it bared no significance to our day - and the theatrical conventions today.

Making a prolonged scene of the avowal-scene in the second act - the one in which Phedre confesses to her illicit love to for her son-in-law, Hippolyte - using her trademark posture, gaze and gestures, will inevitably change emphasis.

In this case, being sucked (via the melodrama) into the emotional space of the action, one would certainly be more forgiving towards Phedre, and modify your pervious views of the scene, those propably more in line with Racine's original, more reproaching mood. What Bernhardt is doing here, however, slightly like a type of manipulation or mental coercion. She is sufficiently enough in tune with her audience that she knows them to accept her stealing the show, providing that strong enough emotions are presented as well as the ambiguity one cofronts as human in a dramatic situation. Her Phedre has been called more sympathetic, as in the Times, or human, and this is one of the elements she exploits directly; in making the audience accomplices and witnesses to the event, she is making the performance-situation more 'real' in a Phenomenological sense;

"I wept, I implored, I cried out; and it was all real  
...the inspiration of "the god" had come. "

The performance could be described as a journey , which is reflected in the audience

through the style/stylus (as w/ 'auteurs') of her acting - even more so when she is standing out from the classical pattern of the Comedie Francaise, in "Romantic Mode" She was bridging the gap between the reality she was in then and the (stage) reality she was about to step into between the real/fiction. So taken, the style or particular visual aspects of her performance become an 'iconoclasm of reality'. Another interesting detail here is the uneven distribution of what scholars and critics would have considered performances of quality.

This imbalance as an ideological theme was one of Bernhardt's to display, not only life as exciting, her individuality, but also truths about her current home with the Comedie Francaise, seen as it was as "the company which we had been thought to regard as representing the perfection of harmony and ensemble", which "has proved to be troubled to an altogether exceptional degree with internal dissensions."

A separation was to come about and as the saying now goes, "a star was born".

In addition, being not always in complete control of all matters on stage meant Bernhardt could - as she thought best fit - enter the character and also, being an artist and not only a clotheshorse, portraying her new type of (theatrical) human, woman (or man), unpredictable (not in the derogative chauvinist sense) fallible, breathing person.

And in this we could argue, she is in fact doing Racine justice, even if she made a few 'misjudgements'. Besides the theme of Iconoclasm running through the materials, there is another large theme here. This one has more to do with the cultural background Sarah Bernhardt had in Paris and the Romantic (literary) influences of hers - the theme of 'escape'. This theme connects also between the three levels of site, performer and

text in the mysterious pointing to the unknown/shown exterior for different, but all psychological functions and needs. The Gaiety was to some extent a place to escape to. I was slightly hedonistic, when compared with other theatres there and it certainly had an (oriental) mystique about it. Bernhardt had a 'romantic' need to escape in and out of that frantic state that creates life - desperation.

The romantic 'seize the day' and not wishing to sit still for one moment, in fear of something bad. Racine has, according to Barthes, three exterior spaces: death, escape and event. Escape, here, as in the previous two examples, can be taken psychologically and criticised on grounds of invalid 'x' that the escape is from. Barthes:

"Escape is never named except by the inferior caste of friends and servants...

constantly recommend escape to the hero on one of those Racinian countless ships that cruise in front of every Racinian tragedy, representing how immediate and how easy negation is". But Bernhardt is clearly wanting to escape her (old) self and a world where one would have to make such morally polarised choices. One further factor important enough to concern ourselves with is in the question of site/stage/reality. If, firstly, Sarah Bernhardt is doing a Stanislavskian-type of approach in that she's living (in) the characters, secondly, making the audience into accomplices and, thirdly, making the performance more 'real' by the previous and by her stylus, where does the stage end, what is its 'purpose' to the outside and is there an outside, if the concept of 'stage' is merely a heuristical device, a tool and mirror for reality?

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