

UNCG University Library Undergraduate Research Award

Mary Robinson

Personal Narrative: “Poetry in Motion: the Divine Sarah on the English Stage”

Theatre History 501 required the writing of a research paper exploring in depth a moment in theatre from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. I wanted to discover the story of Sarah Bernhardt, having heard the name all my life. This project utilised appropriate research strategies and library resources to articulate my discoveries which resulted in a well-crafted paper.

Acknowledging the library’s importance as an invaluable gateway to information, Dr. Woodworth, my professor, scheduled a class meeting with Mark Schumacher, our liaison for the theatre department. He presented an overview of services which included research techniques, search engines, EBSCOhost, and the theatre department’s resources database, a portal for theatrical journals and links. He also informed the class about Interlibrary loan (ILL) where requested materials could be acquired from other libraries. Furthermore, he discussed the Robert Hansen Collection, an archive for the Performing Arts, which contains a plethora of materials, such as playbills, programs, post-cards, and memorabilia, pertaining to nineteenth and twentieth century theatre history. Mr. Schumacher not only provided me with the knowledge I needed to navigate the library system, but he also provided me with a jumping point for my research paper. I valued Mr. Schumacher’s insight into the library system because he deals with it on a daily basis.

I began my research at home, keeping my notes from his presentation nearby for reference. As a Theatre-Media Studies major, time and energy greatly influenced my research strategies. The search engine provided convenience and efficiency because I could work around

my schedule. I browsed the library's catalogue by typing "Sarah Bernhardt" to compile sources. I based my selections on titles, which I added to my "marked records list." This feature proved extremely helpful because I could print out the details, complete with call numbers and descriptions, which made finding books infinitely easier. I ventured to the library, later in the process, to pull my list, but found some of the books checked out, which required an online request from Interlibrary Loan. Amazingly, my order was delivered quickly. Another aspect of my foray to the library was using the digitalised version of the Hansen Collection. I found Sarah Bernhardt listed as one of the archival gems. The magnifying option allowed me to study Bernhardt's elaborate costumes in detail, an imperative portion of my paper. Due to Mr. Schumacher's presentation and helpful information, I made informed decisions in my research techniques and strategies.

My discoveries included both a mixture of planning and serendipity. Most of my research came from planning, such as compiling a list of catalogue findings which allowed me to find resources easily. I discovered that the Internet lacked the depth of knowledge that scholarly books and journals offered. But, the Internet provided some relevant links, such as *The Times* (of London) and British Periodicals, which I accessed using the theatre resources database. Due to my focus on Bernhardt fostering her legend on her first foreign tour to the Gaiety Theatre in London these links provided unexpected primary evidence. I believe the most surprising library source was the Hansen Collection, which I was unaware of prior to Mr. Schumacher's presentation. These archival materials provided insight into another era's theatrical practices, and I started to understand and appreciate the power of publicity, the role of media, and the star system during Bernhardt's lifetime. The library opened a new world of research options and strategies for me that otherwise would have been neglected or overlooked.

Through the writing of *Poetry in Motion: The Divine Sarah on the English Stage*, I've learned about the essential relationship between writing a research paper and the library. My prior research was far too dependent on general search engines, with a limited focus on primary sources and scholarly works. Dr. Woodworth challenged me to write an expertly researched, cohesively argued and well written paper, by using the library's services. I accomplished these goals, as she stated in her syllabus with the guidance received from the kind folks in the library.

UNCG University Libraries Undergraduate Research Award

Faculty Statement of Support of Student Application

Faculty/Instructor name: **Christine Woodworth**
Department: **Theatre**
E-mail: cewoodwo@uncg.edu Phone: **334-3892**
Title of paper: **“Poetry in Motion: The Divine Sarah on the English Stage”**

Name(s) of student(s): **Mary Robinson**

Course number: **THR 501**

Course name: **Theatre History II**

Semester course was taught: Spring 2009 Summer 2009 Fall 2009

Please *type* your responses below. The response fields will expand to accommodate the text entered. Deadline for this statement of support is March 31, 2010.

- 1) In your opinion, how did the student's use of library services, print and/or electronic collections, and other resources, contribute to an exceptional research paper?

Response: Mary seemed to leave no stone un-turned in this research project. Developing a working bibliography that would have been sufficient for a graduate conference paper or article, she explored primary and secondary sources in both English and French. An examination of her paper and its Works Cited list does not illustrate the vast array of sources she consulted throughout the research process. In addition to the work of theatre historians writing on Bernhardt, Mary examined visual materials (including the portions of the Hansen Performing Arts Collection that have been digitized and are available on the library's website) and archival film footage of Bernhardt in her later years. The materials that Mary ultimately referenced in her research paper reflect the scope of scholarship on Bernhardt from the latter portion of the twentieth and

early twenty-first century. These sources are a mix of secondary materials by theatre historians as well as Bernhardt's own writings on her career.

- 2) Please comment on the content and quality of the paper, especially addressing the appropriate and thorough use of research materials. Did the student locate most of the key resources? Was the student creative and flexible in using the collections?

Response: Mary's paper was exceptional for an undergraduate student. Through her exploration of Bernhardt's work on the English stage, Mary argued that Bernhardt strategically employed specific performance techniques in order to further her celebrity status in both England and France. Mary located all of the sources on her own. Mary's paper has been recognized beyond UNCG as well. A version of this paper won the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) Young Scholar's Award. Only one undergraduate student in the country is selected for this prestigious honor. Additionally, Mary presented this paper at the Comparative Drama Conference (a conference almost exclusively comprised of graduate students and faculty presenters) in Los Angeles last weekend. At UNCG, Mary's paper was selected for inclusion in the Honor's Symposium.

Selection Criteria

- Sophistication, creativity, originality, and/or unusual depth or breadth in the use of library collections and resources including, but not limited to, print-based materials, databases, media, and electronic resources
- Exceptional ability to use these resources in the creation of an original research project
- Evidence of significant personal learning and growth in the development of research strategies

In judging for the award, the primary focus will be on the evidence of the student's research strategy, process, and personal learning, which will be summarized in the research essay. Consideration of the product of research, while significant, will be secondary.

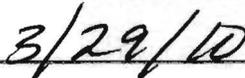
Please give the letter of support to your student to submit with his/her application.

I agree that, if this applicant wins the prize, my letter of support will become permanent property of the UNCG Institutional Repository.

Faculty signature: _____



Date: _____



Mary Robinson

Dr. Christine Woodworth

THR 501

26 November 209

Poetry in Motion: The Divine Sarah on the English Stage

Sarah Bernhardt rebelled against her theatre education, performed when society expected women in the home, and called upon her own resources to achieve an unparalleled level of stardom. In a career which spanned nearly sixty years, this French actress spent approximately two-thirds of this time performing for London audiences. Not considered a particularly promising student, she regarded the Paris Conservatoire's methods as antiquated. One teacher remarked that this young woman would prove a genius or a disaster on the stage. During her 1879 London season, Sarah Bernhardt crafted the legendary phenomenon of Sarah Bernhardt by honing her corporal skills.

An extravagant lifestyle, debt, and her rebellious nature led to Bernhardt's first appearance in London, arranged by her publicist/manager Edward Jarrett. John Hollingshead of the Gaiety Theatre developed a contract for forty-two performances from June to July. According to G.G. Geller, a highly advertised campaign announced the upcoming stage appearances and her availability to perform in private parlours. This media blitz resulted in several thousand English awaiting her arrival in Folkestone because her reputation preceded her. Already an established star in her native France, Bernhardt expected a warmer reception and larger numbers. This low turnout fuelled her desire to conquer this foreign audience, the astute London theatregoers. Furthermore, Geller states that in order to conquer a non-French speaking audience, "She knew that she must draw on her own resources for all that could arouse emotion

and enthusiasm in beings sensible only to her gesture and her cry" (149). Bernhardt herself acknowledges in her memoirs, My Double Life, that she preferred to die in theatrical combat rather than perish full of regret (223). Therefore, she armed herself for the struggle by recognising that her physicality needed to manifest itself in each spoken word, passionate stage gesture, and choreographed movement.

Fearing failure before an English audience, opening night represented her trial by fire. According to Cornelia Otis Skinner, Bernhardt convinced herself that she did not know her lines and could not find her costumes. Overwrought with opening night nerves, she made her English debut when the stage manager shoved her on to the performing stage. Skinner remarks that she pitched her voice too high on opening night, but "If she did, it didn't mar her performance of that tremendous scene [in *Phèdre*]. Her cry to the gods . . . was horrifyingly wonderful. If the majority of the audience failed to understand Racine's words, Bernhardt's gestures, her craving tones carried the meaning" (128). Therefore, the development of her physical presence proved a necessary and successful strategy. She wooed the audience by capitalising on her opening night nerves to physically express the inner anguish of *Phèdre*. Bernhardt received an ovation, unprecedented in British theatre.

Following her debut at the Gaiety, she spent the next six weeks entralling audiences and critics alike. As a member of the Comedie Francais, her repertoire included notable performances in *Phèdre*, *L'Étranger*, *Hernani*, *Le Sphinx*, *Zaire*, and *Ruy Blas*. English critics, wanting to educate their readers in the ways of French theatre, detailed each performance, particularly focusing on her techniques. This attention to detail provided much of the evidence regarding her London appearances. In discussing *Hernani*, performed by Bernhardt in her first London season, *The Daily Telegraph* assessed her unique performance style:

Then begins the torrent of impetuous force that bursts out like a waterfall, and overflows the barriers of restraint . . . The words, 'Pitié! Vous me tuez, mon oncle, en le touchant! Pitié! Je l'aime tant!' echo with a sharp and resonant thrill . . . But there yet remains to tell of the movement and form, of the attitudes that result in apparently unstudied pictures, of the sinuous elegance and feathery lightness of Dona Sol as she insinuates herself in the arms of Hernani with all the confidence of affection, and finally sinks like some faint shadow upon the ground to catch his parting breath and pillow her head upon his dying breast. (Stokes 35)

In addition to this favourable review, critical commentary appeared in other newspapers, such as the *Morning Post* and *London Times*. Critics commented on her combination of poetic lyricism and daring which left the unprepared masses in awe. Bernhardt carved a niche with this audience because her unique style of acting, oral interpretation and corporality, provided a new spectacle for the London public.

The first of three strategies employed by Bernhardt in her pursuit and conquest of London involved vocal prowess. Her vocal techniques combined Paris Conservatoire traditions and experiences at the Boulevard and Odéon Theatre. Bernhardt herself wrote in her treatise on acting, *The Art of the Theatre*, "The voice is the dramatic artist's most necessary instrument" (50). Known as *voix d'or* or the golden voice, English critics often raved over the quality of the Divine Sarah's range. Comparisons to her vocal quality include Taranow's reference to silvery, crystalline, delicate, flutelike, and melodious (27). In stark contrast, though, others recognised her vocal strength containing a booming quality, like thunder and lightning (Ockman and Silver 130). Furthermore, Bernhardt noted breath control as an essential but easily learned strategy because voice depended upon it. May Agate in describing the vocal discipline states that, "She

herself frequently took four alexandrines in one breath - just short of five lines of blank verse if you reckon it in syllables" (34). Sarah's vocal range captured audiences with exquisite, melodious tones as demonstrated in the London performances of *L'Étranger* and the sweet charm of her voice as Doña Sol in *Hernani*. With skillful inflection and precise control over the nuances of her voice, Bernhardt produced results that London theatregoers appreciated. As detailed in her acting treatise, Bernhardt thought that the artist must learn to use the voice as an instrument and control it as though it were a limb (*The Art of The Theatre* 57).

Bernhardt considered the voice as an appendage, no different than an arm or hand, which she also wielded skillfully. Thus, body language provided another key element to Bernhardt's success with the English. She revolutionised and largely capitalised on the use of gesture preceding the vocal delivery which resulted in a melodramatic or histrionic style. The Conservatoire established gesture before vocal delivery, but Bernhardt extended these principles to include three stages: glance, gesture, and word. Agate supports these stages by adding that nineteenth century audiences expected to read a performer's intention, recognise the performer's action, and then hear the performer match words to the dramatic moment (46). Bernhardt's pantomimic formula sustained the drama and appealed to her foreign theatre patrons.

Though Bernhardt adored her English audiences, she showed great reluctance in learning English and on occasion spoke with a heavy accent. Her hesitancy to learn English was attributed to her fear of spoiling her French. Originally written with her in mind, Oscar Wilde sent *The Duchess* to Mary Anderson, an American actress, for an obvious reason. Bernhardt with her limited understanding of English and a heavy accent lacked the ability to sustain a five act English drama. To bridge the language barrier, gestures, therefore, took on a new dimension. Gestures allowed comprehension through visual presentation, enhancing aural meaning.

Using an experiential lens, scholars and biographers alike recognise the significance of pantomime to her success. John Stokes contends that, "In many respects the secret of Bernhardt's acting seems to have been the continual repetition of movements, gestures and expressions from a variety of stage positions, though always clearly visible to the audience" (43). Therefore, Bernhardt's presence on stage proved visually appealing to theatregoers. This also shows an awareness and willingness to please her audience. Despite differences in language, an aspect of her success lay in her ability to speak with the English on a deeper, profound and emotional level. Elaine Aston supports Stokes with the description of "Sarah's acting style, which relied on the pathos of externalising the inner emotions, resulted in a pathetic, passionate and pictorial discourse . . ." (19). Body language effectively conveyed the narrative to the English audiences, despite the language barrier. Wilmar Sauter, on the other hand, gives more of an all encompassing description, "She has created a living masterpiece by her sureness of gesture, the tragic beauty of her pose and glance, the increased power in the timbre of her voice, and the suppleness and breadth of her diction . . ." (132). With the drop of a handkerchief or the wave of her hand, audiences responded with enthusiastic frenzy. Bernhardt's kneeling and prostrate poses elicited audience admiration for her character portrayals. Although typically viewed as submissive, her stance and genuflections proved powerful and riveting to the English. The Divine Sarah perfected and exploited this use of her corporality.

The culmination of gesture, reached its apex in the staging of a Bernhardt death scene. Following her English debut, one critic for the *Morning Post* describes how:

Very brief are the words spoken before Phèdre rushes into the room . . . [and pulls] his sword from its sheath and plunge[s] it in her own breast, she fell back in complete and absolute collapse. This exhibition marvellous in beauty of pose, in febrile force, in

intensity, and in purity of delivery, is the more remarkable [and] proves Mlle. Bernhardt worthy of her reputation and shows what may be expected from her by the public which has eagerly expected her coming. (Bernhardt, *My Double Life* 213)

Although part of a popular trend, her propensity for melodramatic deaths provided her with a trademark. To indicate her impending death, Bernhardt would employ a variety of pantomime, such as dangling her arm, sudden spasms and convulsions, quivering, and a death knell.

Performance relied heavily on her choreography, and she composed the poignant death scenes to prolong the moment of agony, provoking audience response.

Although known as the *voix d'or*, she also recognised the power of silence and used it effectively in the death scene. Her body conveyed what words could not, as supported by Taranow in, "So effective did her visual style become that, during climatic scenes, words were often unnecessary for comprehension" (xiii). In The Art of The Theatre, Bernhardt cautioned against fearing stage silence and further elaborates that, "Some there are who are the slaves of their voices: they are seduced by the sound of words, and are carried away by the cadence of verses or phrases. They have become enamoured of the vocal effects, and this is a most pernicious habit" (57). In strategically using silence, audiences focused in on Bernhardt attentively, and this attention enhanced the times she did use dialogue, moved gracefully, or choreographed the silence. As a testament to her ability to communicate on all levels with the audience, regardless of language, Bernhardt effectively utilised her physicality.

Bernhardt's third corporal strategy, costuming, developed as an extension of gesture and movement. She asserted that, "Every time that I start to work on a role I see the character in my imagination in costume, with hair styled, walking, greeting, sitting down, standing up. But that is only the materialized vision from which there suddenly emerges the soul, which must

dominate the character" (*My Double Life* 59). She saw the importance of costuming as the manner in which to develop the character but also as a method or means for communicating the character to the audience. Sauter asserts that, "Sarah Bernhardt's way of displaying her costumes - as a way of staging her personality and creating a fictional character - contributes to the sensory impression she achieved" (125). Costumes proved integral to Bernhardt's success with the English by contributing to the success or failure of a role.

Her impulse to decorate allowed her to present herself on stage as a work of art. Instead of downplaying her physical flaws, such as her thinness and unruly hair, she flaunted and used these assets to her advantage. She insisted her costumes fit the contour of her waifish physique. Furthermore, she concealed her lanky arms in folds of material or gloves, as well as using ornate headdresses and veils to belie her untamed mane. Critics frequently commented on and applauded her costumes in terms of the spectacle created. Tom Taylor of the *London Times*, attributed her success with the English audiences to gestures, charm and management of drapery, and applauded these as the secret of Bernhardt's success to creating the most feminine 'Phaedre' he had ever seen (Taranow 111). In an 1879 interview, Bernhardt insisted she disassociated herself with her Conservatoire education and its tradition, stating, "People come in your way with conventions, and you must have a will of iron to put them aside . . . I dressed for my parts, according to my notions, solely with an eye to my personal advantages and defects" (Stokes 31). Bernhardt's use of costume on the English stage provided spectacle and bolstered not only her character portrayal but her image.

Bernhardt's costuming filled a unique void on the English stage. Nineteenth century English audiences held actresses to idealistic and submissive standards which included proper etiquette, self-restraint, and lady-like demeanour. Bernhardt, however, flagrantly disregarded

these restrictions using costume and movement. The writer Jules Lemaître remarked that her pantomimic femininity, revealed in serpentine movements, possessed a boldness and fearlessness because she used her entire costumed body (Taranow 108). Aston asserts that, "Many of her costumes were designed to accentuate her serpentine movements with folds of drapery which hugged the contours of her body, whirling up behind her in trains of fabric" (28). Bernhardt exploited the direct relationship between costuming and her movements in her performances.

Body language not only provided a visual discourse, but Bernhardt developed visual cues, through costuming, to garner audience attention and reaction. For example, in her discussion of *Ruy Blas*, Aston elaborates on the importance of costuming to Bernhardt's stage persona, stating that, "Even her magnificent costume echoed the theme of imprisonment: 'her superb dress, rustling with precious stones and rigid with embroidery, was, in itself, almost a prison . . . it is the woman trapped beneath the shell of the queen who breaks free'" (26). Since the majority of the audience spoke little French, costumes added to audience comprehension of her character and the plot. Cultivating her image using costumes as a decorative art, creating beauty, magnificence, and splendour, Bernhardt's impact on the English audience was profound.

Sarah Bernhardt challenged the acting conventions of her time. Her rebellious nature and desire to conquer led to her successful season at the Gaiety Theatre in 1879. Wilmar Sauter discusses the Bernhardt oeuvre which brought about the legend, with, "I don't think there is any other actor or actress, dead or alive, who can challenge her fame during her own life time and after (118). Her unparalleled level of stardom came at a time when women's roles in society were evolving. Bernhardt's vision and control of her corporal craft resulted in the English audiences' continual support and admiration. Bernhardt notes in her memoirs that, "This first

night in London was a definitive one for my career" (*My Double Life* 213). Her success at the Gaiety proved a catalyst, not only for her life but for the course of her theatrical career.

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