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A Tour de Force: Sarah Bernhardt and her 1906 Florida Tour

LELA F. KERLEY

Considered one of the most renowned and talented tragediennes of all time, Sarah Bernhardt—or “The Divine Sarah” as she was alternately known—made nine American tours between 1880 and 1917. In addition to performing in the urban metropolises of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, Bernhardt and her troupe of French actors and actresses entertained audiences across the South in the spring of 1906. Having visited Atlanta, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Mobile during previous tours, Bernhardt included two stops in Florida: one in Tampa, the other in Jacksonville. Touted by the *Pensacola Journal* as “the great theatrical achievement of modern times,” Bernhardt’s Florida debut signaled the state’s coming of age from an agrarian, cattle-raising frontier to a playground for the rich and famous.¹ Her visit came at a propitious moment in the state’s history as the extension of railroad lines and the building of luxury hotels not only aided in the larger reconstruction of a “New South” but also contributed to the amalgamation of French culture with Florida pioneer life.

This article addresses the importance of Florida’s contact with France at the turn of the twentieth century by exploring the marriage of two forces, French culture and American industry, in the context of Bernhardt’s 1905-1906 American tour. Whereas scholars studying Florida history in the decades following the Civil War have mainly focused their attention on the financial exploits and leisure pursuits of wealthy Northern capitalists who opened the state up to expansion, they have largely ignored the way in which these capital investments led to, or were accompanied by, cultural change.² Thanks to the rise of steam liners and steam engines, port towns and harbors in Jacksonville, Tampa, Pensacola, and Miami benefited from an increased flow of information, goods, money, and tourists. Unsurprisingly, these cities attracted a number of traveling theatrical troupes in

search of new markets and audiences to exploit. Bernhardt's company added to Florida's rich cultural heritage, transgressing geographical borders, bridging language barriers, and facilitating national and international ties between Florida and other communities.



Figure 1. Sarah Bernhardt, 1879. Library of Congress.

Born Rosine Bernardt [sic] in 1844, Sarah (as she preferred to be called) used the mysterious origins of her birth and an eccentric upbringing to construct a persona that would typify the fin-de-siècle “New Woman.” The product of a Dutch courtesan of Jewish descent and a father whose identity remained largely unknown (her father was a law student by the name of Édouard Bernhard), Bernhardt lived with an aunt in Paris and attended an exclusive convent school in Versailles before enrolling in the Paris Conservatory of Music and Drama at the age of sixteen.³ In 1862, she joined the most prestigious state-sponsored theater in Paris, the Comédie Française, as a *sociétaire* until a falling out with the management resulted in her departure a year later.⁴ By the time she returned to the Comédie Française in 1872, Bernhardt had established herself as one of France's finest dramatic actresses.⁵ She remained with the theatrical company for another eight years before a second rupture of contract led her to take charge of her own professional affairs.

Scholarship has shown that women of nineteenth-century Europe, in taking advantage of new technologies, a changing workforce, and revolutionary discourses on the rights of the individual, whittled away at the age-old stereotype of females as the “weaker sex.”⁶ By the mid-1890s, the term “New Woman” connoted a diverse group of women who, while differing in approach as well as on the degree to which the female sex should claim a greater share of the public sphere, evidenced a dramatic shift in female consciousness characterized by a heightened awareness

about themselves as active participants on the social and political stage.⁷ As Mary Lou Roberts points out in her book on the New Woman in fin-de-siècle France, the theater offered women a space where they could perform traditional gender roles in subversive ways, exposing supposedly essential male and female character traits as acts. In Bernhardt's case, writes Roberts, she "exaggerated key elements of conventional femininity—love of luxury and self-adornment, frivolity, and the need to be pampered—to such an extent that they began to look comical and ridiculous. In this way, she managed to both epitomize and make fun of French womanhood at the same time."⁸

The actress's choice of "Quand Même" ("in spite of everything") as a maxim "embroidered on her linens, printed on her visiting cards, and engraved on her richly embossed revolver," spoke to the combative attitude with which she approached life.⁹ In the interim period between her contracts with Comédie-Française, she assumed the role of a courtesan to support her illegitimate son Maurice. Upon her return to the stage, she became an immediate success for her cross-dressing roles. In addition to acting, she defied traditional gendered notions of the artist as a creative male genius by painting, sculpting, and exhibiting her own work at the 1893 Chicago Exposition and the 1900 Universal Exposition. One of the most iconic figures of the Belle Époque, Bernhardt also served as muse for other artists whose posters, photographs, and caricatures continually kept her in the public eye. Moreover, her sensational exploits posing nude for the photographer Nadar, cycling, taking hot-air balloon rides, and being romantically linked to European royalty and Bohemian artists of both sexes were well-documented by the Parisian press. At sixty-one years of age in 1906, Bernhardt accepted a professorship at the Paris Conservatory and in 1914 became the first actress to accept the prestigious Legion of Honor for service to the French nation.¹⁰ Despite the implantation of a prosthetic leg in 1915, Bernhardt continued to perform, manage, and direct the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt (1899-1923) until the age of seventy.¹¹ A leading theater critic of the day, William Winter, remarked, "It is startling to reflect that a woman who thus reached the zenith of her career a generation ago is still a working actress."¹²

Most of what we know about Bernhardt's impressions of the United States comes from her memoirs. Published in 1907, *My Double Life* only mentions her first tour which lasted from 1880 to 1881.¹³ After two weeks at sea upon the steamship *L'Amérique*, Bernhardt set foot on American soil where throngs of people greeted her in New York Harbor. The actress recalled being immediately struck by the intensity, drive, and determination Americans exhibited in their social interactions along the streets. Exhausted by the pace of American life in the first few hours after debarkation, she purportedly locked herself up in a hotel room in order to escape the mayhem. Yet her memoirs reveal a keen curiosity about American industry and innovation as evidenced by her visit to Thomas Edison's laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey. Equally so, her writings belie an admiration for the daringness of American individualism. At one point, a fisherman convinces her to stand on the back

of a harpooned whale and, as a souvenir, to take a piece of whalebone as a publicity stunt.¹⁴ Bernhardt's larger-than-life personality enraptured the American public, fueled its taste for the spectacular and conspicuous self-displays of femininity, as well as contributed to the actress's reputation as the first "modern-day" celebrity.¹⁵

Patricia Marks has retraced the actress's stops, examining journalistic accounts, theater reviews, and caricatures that appeared in local papers. Her analysis makes a significant contribution to understanding Bernhardt's reception by the American public. "Bernhardt's figure," she argues, "was inscribed with cultural values."¹⁶ According to Marks, a majority of Americans viewed Bernhardt as "socially suspect" because she was a foreigner, a Jew, and an actress (11). Although certain qualities or characteristics that Bernhardt possessed resonated differently within the communities she visited, her race, ethnicity, sex, and profession in large part influenced how one thought about her.

A handful of regional studies examining Bernhardt's visits to Ohio, California, and Arkansas provide a framework and lens for comparing how audiences in the West, Midwest, and South reacted to her across a number of different registers.¹⁷ All of these studies to varying degrees credit Bernhardt with introducing a new type of emotional acting to the United States; one that was powerful yet graceful, dramatic yet realistic. Woven into their descriptions of Bernhardt's performances are comments about her unconventional behavior and distinct physical appearance, her curiosity to see the American West, and her willingness to raise money for the victims of the San Francisco Earthquake. The only article to examine Bernhardt's visit to the South does so in the context of her first American tour (1880-1881) and seems to suggest why it would be another twenty years before the actress returned.¹⁸

After spending all of November, December, and January in cities as far north as Montreal, Bernhardt recollected the sense of relief she felt upon leaving that "repulsively dirty" city of St. Louis, formerly the site of a French trading post.¹⁹

Now, I thought, we shall have some sunshine and we shall be able to warm our poor limbs, which were stiffened with three months of mortal cold. We shall be able to open our windows and breathe fresh air, instead of suffocating an enervating steam heat. I fell asleep, and dreams of warmth and sweet scents lulled me in my slumber. (191)

Bernhardt's assumptions about the South, as a tropical or pastoral retreat from the harsh climate and industrial nature of the North, appear whimsical and naïve when compared with her actual experiences. Bernhardt's first visit to the region was fraught with a series of dangers and embarrassing moments. Just after leaving St. Louis, she and her troupe narrowly avoided a train robbery and a near-death experience when, "half leaping and half rolling," her train crossed the St. Louis Bay Bridge shortly before it collapsed (193). In New Orleans, her staff woke to find snakes

in their beds and her pet alligator, Ali-Gaga—a souvenir from the city—dead of a champagne overdose. The grand finale of her Southern tour occurred in Mobile where, in the middle of a performance, the scenery fell on top of the troupe.²⁰

At the age of thirty-seven, Bernhardt's relative youth, sense of adventure, and desire to break free from the constraints of the Comédie Française were clearly motivating factors behind her 1880-1881 American tour. But what led her to return to America's shores so many times, as Marks has claimed, was at once "to introduce a selection of French drama to a decidedly unintellectual country" and to "make money."²¹ Mutually beneficial from both a personal and national perspective, these motives influenced her decision to revisit the South and to brave the potential perils of a Florida tour as well. In exchange for spreading French culture and the arts, local managers promised Bernhardt ample monetary remuneration, an offer the actress, often close to bankruptcy due to her profligate ways and at the end of her career, could not refuse.²²

It is important to understand Sarah Bernhardt's 1906 Florida tour in the context of the tremendous economic growth, development, and social change occurring at that time. While the turn of the century represented a period of nation building for both the United States and France, the goals and the means by which these countries exerted global influence were quite different. Between the years 1866 and 1900, the United States experienced a massive wave of immigration, absorbing over 13.25 million people.²³ Accompanying this demographic change was a profound sense of xenophobia which, in the case of the upper classes, found expression through the emulation of French culture.²⁴ Long associated with the royal court at Versailles, and by extension the French bourgeoisie after 1789, sophistication and refinement of manners appealed to an American "aristocracy" taking root during the Gilded Age. According to Leanne Zawelski, wealthy industrialists and financiers like Jay Gould, William H. Vanderbilt, and William Astor amassed large collections of French art while their wives travelled to Paris to have their portraits painted "preferably by artists of note whose reputation would lend an air of cultural sophistication to their pictorial image."²⁵

As nouveaux-riche Americans flocked to Paris to affirm their status as cultural elites, France's government, the Third Republic, initiated an imperialist policy that spread notions of French greatness throughout its empire and the world. Rather than encouraging migration to the metropole, this "civilizing mission" promoted diplomatic relations through the adoption of French language and culture.²⁶ Historians examining French imperialism have often overlooked the way in which this project operated between France and other first-world countries which fell outside of the traditional metropole-colony model of dominance and exploitation.²⁷

The arts served as an important conduit for late nineteenth and early twentieth-century soft diplomacy as artists, musicians, and performers, aided by the latest technologies in transportation and communication, traversed the globe as cultural ambassadors. In her book *Female Spectacle: Theatrical Roots of Modern*

Feminism, historian Susan Glenn argues that Sarah Bernhardt “exercised a formative impact on the cultural imagination of turn-of-the-century Americans,” so much so that “the name and concept ‘Sarah Bernhardt’ remained an important form of cultural shorthand for volatile displays of female emotion.”²⁸ Calling this phenomenon “The Bernhardt Effect,” Glenn credits the actress for introducing the notion of the “modern celebrity” to America. Bernhardt fabricated and successfully promoted an image of herself as an eccentric, independent, business-savvy, and sexually-liberated woman. One thing was clear,” Glenn concludes, “Americans did come to have their own particular set of investments in the image and idea of Sarah Bernhardt” (10).

In the sixty years following its admission to the Union in 1846, Florida remained a predominantly rural, agrarian state.²⁹ Its main industries consisted of farming cotton, growing citrus, and extracting turpentine and phosphate.³⁰ As one of the founding members of the Confederacy, Florida underwent a difficult transition reintegrating itself into the Union during Reconstruction. Former Confederate soldiers who had moved to Florida, in part, to escape the federal government’s reach, clashed with Northern carpetbaggers and fomented resistance against the government by forming hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan. “Their praise of the discredited institution of slavery, their rigorous Black Code, and their reliance on lawlessness to keep Negroes in subjection went almost unnoticed.”³¹ Historian Tommy R. Thompson notes the delayed acceptance and integration of African-Americans into society as racial tensions between whites and blacks oftentimes led to lynching, a practice largely ignored by local populations even by Northern tourists.³² The migration of Cubans to Tampa and South Florida exacerbated the ethnic and racial divisions that characterized Florida’s diverse population.³³

By the 1890s, however, Florida had entered into a decade “of tremendous growth.”³⁴ This is perhaps best illustrated by the state’s representation at the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair. There, private investors showcased Florida’s natural resources in a pavilion modeled off of the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.³⁵ In addition to the World’s Fair, popular magazines provided Florida with national publicity as journalists recounted how the redevelopment of Atlanta, Memphis, and Nashville was helping to create a “New South.” Likewise, the influx of people and investment capital pouring into Tampa, Jacksonville, and Palm Beach contributed to what observers called a “New Florida.”³⁶ In the first decade of the twentieth century under the leadership of Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward (1905-1909), Florida’s growth rate doubled the national average.³⁷

As a relatively untouched frontier, Florida’s reputation as a land of opportunity appealed to a broad spectrum of settlers who would, in driving social, political and economic change in the first quarter of the twentieth century, break Florida’s backwardness and isolation. According to John Guthrie, Jr., early twentieth-century Florida became home to “the oldest Spiritualist community in the South.”³⁸ Largely discredited for the belief that the living could communicate with the dead,

Spiritualists moving from the Midwest brought with them a “traditional middle-class lifestyle” that stressed “progressive issues, including women’s suffrage, temperance, and government intervention in the economy” (4). Added to these modernizing influences was the role that transportation and tourism played in bringing people to the “Sunshine State.”³⁹ Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, two American industrial capitalists, started a Railroad Boom in the 1880s and 1890s which, in turn, fed growth in tourism and the hotel industry by the early 1900s. America’s wealthier classes who were drawn to the therapeutic benefits of Florida’s warm climate found “escape” and relaxation in their tropical surroundings.⁴⁰ Similarly, Florida’s appeal as a resort destination extended across the Atlantic Ocean as more foreign writers visited the state in the first half of the century than any prior period.⁴¹

Despite these recent developments, few of Florida’s leading cities at the turn of the century were large enough to attract first-rate theatrical productions. The arrival of Bernhardt’s company stood in stark contrast to the small traveling theatrical companies that “visited Florida intermittently from 1900 until the early 1920s.”⁴² From the scant evidence available, one finds that Bernhardt was originally contracted to play in Jacksonville and Palm Beach en route to Havana, Cuba, a city where she performed during her 1886 Central and South American tour.⁴³ Bernhardt’s performance was timed to take place at the end of the “theatrical” or winter season right before wealthy foreigners and Northerners returned to their summer homes located in milder climates.

At some point before her performances in Havana and at the Royal Poinciana Hotel in Palm Beach were cancelled, the managers of the Tampa Bay Hotel and Casino made a bid to have their establishment added to the list of Florida stops.⁴⁴ They argued persuasively that Tampa afforded Bernhardt an opportunity to earn some extra money “on the company’s return to the US from Havana.” It took several weeks for the Tampa Bay Hotel and Casino to negotiate a contract with the actress’s management who reportedly appeared “obdurate” and “would not listen to a proposition to play in Tampa.” With only one contract to perform in the state now, Bernhardt’s manager, William Connor, needed to fill open dates and finally agreed to include Tampa when the managers personally guaranteed Bernhardt a profit of \$3,000.⁴⁵ While this was a noticeably smaller sum than the \$7,000 Bernhardt made on the first day of ticket sales in Chicago, it was three times more than she had made in Youngstown and Dayton, Ohio respectively. In all Bernhardt would make \$200,000 during her 1906 tour of sixty-four cities.

By the turn of the century, Tampa had grown from a small hamlet of less than one thousand people in 1885 into one of the state’s major cities for business, finance, and trade. In the first decade alone, the city’s population grew by 138% compared with the state and national growth rate averages of 42% and 21% respectively.⁴⁶ The discovery of phosphate (an important mineral used in fertilizers) just south of the city, along with Vincente Martinez Ybor’s decision to move his lucrative cigar manufacturing business from Key West to Tampa and the War Department’s

selection of Tampa as an embarkation center for the Spanish-American War in 1898, directly contributed to the city's demographic expansion. According to Durward Long, "the majority of the world's phosphate and the lion's share of cigars passed" through Tampa in 1911 making the number of manufacturing jobs "nearly four times that of any other Florida city" (334, 341).

Tampa's economic development, however, would not have been possible without Henry Plant's Savannah, Florida & Western Railway. As the main terminus on Florida's West Coast Railroad, Tampa benefited from a network of railway lines that connected it to other burgeoning coastal towns (i.e. Key West, Jacksonville) in Florida and along the East Coast as far north as Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina. Moreover, its warm climate and close proximity to sea lanes running through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean made it an ideal port city for tourism and trade with Cuba (334). America's nouveaux-riche and Europe's aristocracy quickly saw the therapeutic and social advantages of Plant's transportation system. They flocked to Tampa as a tropical retreat where they could either spend the winter months or depart on one of Plant's luxury steam liners for other destinations further south, namely Key West and Havana, Cuba.



Figure 2. Tampa Bay Hotel, circa 1900. HistoricalFlorida.com.

Many chose to stay in Tampa and to hold court at the Tampa Bay Hotel, which, having opened in February 1891, gained notoriety as "the most original, most attractive, and most beautiful hotel in the South."⁴⁷ Acquired by the city a year before Bernhardt's performance, the hotel could accommodate 700 guests and represented the only non-wooden structure in the city.⁴⁸ On January 30th, the city's leading paper, *Tampa Tribune*, announced Bernhardt's upcoming engagement at the exclusive site, marketing it as "the greatest event, theatrically speaking, that ever occurred in Tampa." The paper predicted the sensation it would cause as "people from all over South Florida will come to Tampa to see the great actress." Ticket prices ran the gamut from orchestra and dress-circle seats selling between \$4-5 while those in the gallery sold for \$2-3.⁴⁹ In the aftermath of the event, Arcadia, Florida's local

paper *The Champion* listed all the “prominent Arcadians” who went to “hear and see” her.⁵⁰ While it is unclear just how much money Bernhardt made from her appearance, the *Pensacola Journal* reported just ten days after the performance that a Madam Nordica “kindly arranged to capture the balance” that night “fearing that Sarah did not get all of the loose change of Tampa theatre [sic] goers.”⁵¹

Bernhardt was undertaking a huge financial risk when she embarked on her 1905-1906 American tour. As a modern woman who liked to remain in control of her own affairs—both personally and professionally—Bernhardt, refused to submit her independence, and a share of the receipts, to what was known as the Theatrical Syndicate. Established in 1896 to assist local theater managers in their negotiations with multiple acting troupes, the Theatrical Syndicate represented one of the country’s largest booking agencies. In the words of one author, the Syndicate was “a mixed blessing, part good and part bad.”⁵² While the agency prevented double booking and ensured that theaters would be filled on any given night, it all but eliminated artistic freedom in the theater by controlling who performed what and where.⁵³ The Theatrical Syndicate eventually overtook its rivals to become the only agency through which an actor or troupe could gain access to the nation’s theaters.⁵⁴



Figure 3. Sarah Bernhardt Farewell Tour, 1917-1918. EphemeraStudies.org.

On June 29, 1905 the *New York Daily Tribune* announced that the actress had agreed to do a thirty week tour of the United States and Canada with the Shubert brothers as her booking agents.⁵⁵ Attempting to break the Syndicate’s stranglehold on power, these three young brothers (Sam, Lee, and J.J.) marketed what would be

the second of Bernhardt's five "Farewell American Tours."⁵⁶ Her decision to support the underdog and challenge the Theatrical Syndicate's monopoly did not go unnoticed in the Sunshine State. Jacksonville's paper *The Sun* reported that "Sarah Bernhardt has a new role because her managers are not in the Theatrical Trust."⁵⁷ Questions concerning where she would perform and whether theaters controlled by the Syndicate would remain closed to her circulated in the press. As expected, the Syndicate resorted to tactics it had used in the past to maintain its monopoly, threatening member-theaters with the forfeiture of all future Syndicate attractions if they opened their houses to the actress. In either case, theaters controlled by the Syndicate would take a financial hit. Booking Bernhardt for a one-night stand, one manager confessed, would "bring in an entire week's receipts on a regular attraction." Not only would he forego these profits but it would also disappoint those who had wanted to see her.⁵⁸

This tour was unlike any other; it was financially risky, unconventional, physically challenging, as well as logistically complicated. Yet, according to Jacksonville's Local Manager, Mr. Duckley, it was nothing short of "phenomenal." Breaking with the customary fifty to one hundred miles that most troupes travelled in a day, Duckley recounted the miles her train, nicknamed "The Sarah Special," covered in-between one-night stands. Bernhardt travels "thousands of miles" playing "one night in Minneapolis, for instance, next night in Des Moines, next to Memphis then Nashville, Asheville, Savannah thence to Tampa and then to Jacksonville, Atlanta, Chattanooga and New Orleans." "The funny part of it all," Duckley continued, "is that the greatest living actress seems to actually enjoy the experiences." Her private Pullman car was luxuriously appointed with all the modern conveniences and comforts such as carpets, sofas, a piano, and potted plants. An entourage of hired stagehands constructed and deconstructed enormously elaborate stage settings twenty-four hours in advance of her arrival. Echoing the sentiments expressed by managers across America, Duckley praised her "manageability" and cited the affable manner with which she put up with "hundreds of newspaper reporters... scores of discomforts and annoyances of one-night stands."⁵⁹

It is hard to know what Bernhardt expected when she played in these smaller, independent venues, but she made the best of her circumstances by creating what one paper called her own "remarkable houses." "Bernhardt Tents" went up in Dallas, Waco, Chicago, and Duluth. Skating rinks in Savannah, Tampa, Jacksonville, Butte, and Spokane were converted into theaters alongside auditoriums in Kansas City, Omaha, Nashville, and Chattanooga. Even a livery stable in Montgomery, Alabama and the dining room of Palm Beach's Royal Poinciana were to have served as locations for her shows before they were cancelled. In May 1906, *The Sunday Oregonian* wrote, "There are plenty of other odd places in which the great tragedienne has found herself, but these few suffice to prove the general statement that Madam [sic] Bernhardt doesn't care a whoop where she plays."⁶⁰



Figure 4. Sarah Bernhardt Tent, Chicago, 1906. Library of Congress.

Bernhardt's direct challenge to the Theatrical Syndicate's cartel added to the publicity and popularity surrounding her sixth American tour. "Because of alleged discrimination which bars her from theaters," wrote one journalist, "her wrath is not only up but has become expressive."⁶¹ Despite a language barrier between Bernhardt, who performed in French and spoke little English, and her American spectators, the two shared a "language of emotions" that Marks describes "left her audiences both weeping and exhilarated."⁶² Glenn explains Bernhardt's ability to connect with the American public stating that "By 1900 American theater had become a player-centered institution where the strong personality and physical vitality of the performer was as important to audiences (sometimes more so) than the play. Bernhardt took this to an extreme by turning every play she performed into a showcase for her eccentric and egotistical self."⁶³

While Bernhardt's 1905-1906 repertoire included eleven plays, it was *Camille*, a play based on the 1852 novel *La Dame aux Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas the Younger, that she chose to perform for Florida audiences.⁶⁴ In her signature role about a fallen woman, Bernhardt's interpretation departed from previous productions by showing Marguerite Gauthier in a sympathetic light. "It was her weakness and strength, her joy and misery," wrote the *Ocala Banner*, that Bernhardt conveyed so effectively. "You see as she sees, you feel as she feels and you lose thought for the time being of Bernhardt's existence as you follow the fate and fortunes of the character of life and realism."⁶⁵ Floridians didn't have to "go brush up" on their French, as *The Champion* noted, in order for audiences to visually, and thereby emotionally, connect with the play's central themes of class, respectability, and illicit love.⁶⁶

While Bernhardt's style of acting was new to those here in the state, Bernhardt as a subject of the early twentieth-century Florida press was not. As Marks notes in her study, Bernhardt captured Americans' fascination in part because she embodied a core set of American values, namely "freedom, individualism, and money-making."⁶⁷ Alongside of these traits was an aura, a mystique that Bernhardt herself cultivated as a part of her celebrity status. A quote by the famous French playwright Jules Lemaître sheds insight into how Bernhardt was perceived by the French and Floridians alike. "She might go into a nunnery, discover the North Pole, be

inoculated with rabies, assassinate an emperor, or marry a Negro king,” he wrote, “and I should never be surprised at anything she did. She is more alive and more incomprehensible by herself than a thousand other human beings.”⁶⁸

For Floridians, the French actress embodied at once a rugged *and* a refined individualism to which they could both relate and aspire. Local papers remarked on her age, her boundless energy, and independence as a modern woman. In “Red Hair and Genius,” the *Ocala Evening Star* listed Bernhardt alongside the Queen of Troy, Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and Marie Antoinette as one of history’s “Great Women.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Madison, Florida’s *The New Enterprise* remarked that Sarah Bernhardt “eats only two solid meals in a day; one in the morning and the second at one the next morning.”⁷⁰ This announcement appeared under the “Boudoir Chat,” a column devoted exclusively to the accomplishments of famous women for an informed, female reading public. In that same issue, the “Boudoir Chat” told of women obtaining doctoral degrees, becoming lawyers, joining the civil service as clerks, and serving as nurses. Three months later it included a casual reference to the historic charm of Bernhardt’s summer home. Located on along the Brittany coast, Belle Île was originally built as a fortress in 1750. The paper announced that “when Mme. Bernhardt is at the quaint old place, a flag flies from a low tower.”⁷¹ Papers around the state also reported on her plans “to build and maintain a theater in New York” called the Bernhardt Theater that was to be located across the street from the Metropolitan Opera House.⁷² In addition to these blurbs, Bernhardt’s name appeared alongside three quintessentially southern subjects that eventually became her namesakes: an almond macaroon cookie, an absinthe-infused cocktail, and a hog.⁷³ Each consumable item referenced an essential aspect of Bernhardt’s character in terms of her religion (a Jew who was fed a steady diet of non-kosher meat while touring the South), her temperament (difficult yet delightful), and a self-avowed enthusiast and promoter of absinthe (whose likeness appeared in Terminus Absinthe advertisements).

The day after Bernhardt performed in Tampa on March 13, she travelled by rail to Jacksonville. According to the 1900 census, Jacksonville represented the largest city in the state with more than 28,000 residents. Known as the “Gateway to Florida,” Jacksonville had emerged as a “commercial and industrial center” thanks to its location along two major transportation networks: the St. Johns River and the Florida Central Railroad.⁷⁴ Like Tampa, Jacksonville operated as an important railway terminus but for the East rather than the West Coast. Until 1913, Union Depot “was the only station in the state not built of wood.”⁷⁵ The Florida East Coast Railway took people all the way down to West Palm Beach where the Duke and Duchess of Manchester, the Astors, Vanderbilts, and Goulds spent the winter months.⁷⁶

For the last half century, Jacksonville had repeatedly made bids to become the state capitol. A fire in 1901 all but ended these efforts when over \$15 million in damage to businesses and residential homes in the downtown area left nine thousand people homeless and out of work.⁷⁷ In the five years before Bernhardt’s

arrival, Jacksonville made a remarkable recovery. While some of the latest technologies, like the commercial wireless telegram, were still a few years away, Jacksonville would in later years compete with Los Angeles to become “the center of the motion picture industry.”⁷⁸

Bernhardt’s stop in Jacksonville was an important step in the process of rebuilding and gaining national recognition as a city that supported the arts. The first mention of Bernhardt appeared in the *Florida Times Union* on February 16, 1906 less than a month before her performance. “It has been positively announced that Sarah Bernhardt” will appear here in a performance of *Camille*. “Active preparations” were being made both for the performance itself and to capitalize on her celebrity status in the city’s promotion of upcoming events.⁷⁹ A South Carolina paper reported three days before her arrival that Bernhardt had telegraphed Herbert Race, secretary of the Jacksonville Association stating that she would endorse any trophy offered in her name to the winner of the sixty-mile Atlantic-Pablo Beach Automobile Race scheduled for April.⁸⁰

Before the building of its first theater in 1884, Jacksonville’s reputation as a show town was already established. According to a 1939 travel guide to the state, “empty stores and school buildings were used by one-night stand companies,” which came through the city in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁸¹ Established in the early 1890s, Duval Theater billed such “leading artists” as John Phillip Sousa’s band, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Russian Symphony Orchestra.⁸² Although the most logical place for Bernhardt to perform, Duval Theater was one of over 500 theaters contractually bound to the Theatrical Syndicate.⁸³ Consequently, Connor looked for another popular site that could accommodate “exceedingly large crowds.”⁸⁴ Following the management’s decision to convert an “immense” skating rink “into a beautiful modern theater,” the *Ocala Banner* assured its readers that “this will be a first-class production with fine scenery, full stage settings.”⁸⁵ Likewise, the *Florida Times Union* reminded readers that “this would be the last chance that Floridians would have to see Bernhardt in her “most exhausting and overpowering role... as the greatest of all living or dead Camilles” before her retirement.⁸⁶

Bettes Drug Store, on the corner of Bay and Laura Street, began selling tickets to the event on March 2nd.⁸⁷ “Wisely” priced between \$1 and \$3, tickets to the Jacksonville performance were comparatively cheaper than those in Tampa.⁸⁸ Mr. Duckley told the *Jacksonville Metropolis* that one-third of the house had already been reserved through mail orders sent out in the paper. “The line of waiting purchasers anxious to see the diagram of seats in the rink” was expected to be so long that he had secured police to regulate traffic outside the store.⁸⁹ This spring event was to attract spectators not only from Jacksonville but across North-Central Florida. The *Ocala Star Banner* reported that “quite a large party,” consisting of important city leaders, businessmen, and doctors, planned to travel by rail to Jacksonville and return home the next day.⁹⁰ This list indicates that those in attendance were members of Florida’s social elite but were not the millionaires for whom Bernhardt

was used to performing in cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. In reporting that a Dr. Henry E. Palmer visited Jacksonville for personal and professional reasons that same week, Tallahassee's *The Weekly True Democrat* surmised that he almost surely attended Bernhardt's performance for "taking a lesson in French from her is very interesting." The auditory experience that one encountered, along with the actress's histrionics, the editor reasoned, was why so many "flock to see and hear her, but then it's great to be able to say one has seen and listened to Sarah."⁹¹

While little is known about the actual performance, the press reported that 3,000 people were in attendance the evening of March 14th.⁹² Through "the sheer force of her own magnificent acting, overcoming ever the poor acoustic properties of the skating auditorium and the fact that every word she spoke fell strangely on the ears of her more than 3,000 hearers," the *Florida Times Union* praised Bernhardt for "an exhibition of the histrionic art that has never been seen here before, and what is most to be regretted, probably never will again."⁹³ As the *St. Lucie County Tribune* so aptly put it, "The Divine Sarah has at last said her little piece in Jacksonville and departed. She came, was seen, and conquered them."⁹⁴

Regardless of her motivations for touring America and travelling to Florida, Bernhardt's 1906 tour highlights a defining moment in Florida's past—a moment when France was enjoying and exercising an unprecedented level of cultural influence in the United States. Having risen to the status of a cultural icon during her lifetime, Bernhardt acted as an ambassador for France and its commanding role in the dramatic arts during her visit to the state. What attracted and literally brought the world's greatest actress to the Sunshine State was the very symbol of American industry, the railroads, which laid the foundation for Florida's tourism industry. Facilitated by Henry Plant and Henry Flagler's quest to modernize Florida, her visit to the state coincided with Floridians' desire to shed their rural roots for a more cosmopolitan identity. While it is difficult to know with any certainty what the composition of the audiences were at her Florida venues, ticket pricing and comments in small town newspapers suggest that people from across the state, regardless of social class or distance, travelled en masse to behold "The Divine Sarah." In contrast to other communities within the country, those in Florida focused less on Bernhardt's Jewishness and transgressive behavior and more on her character. At a time of intense economic development and expansion, Floridians attributed significance to Bernhardt's 1906 tour of the state, equating French theater with cultural sophistication and Bernhardt with a new form acting. Floridians expressed their admiration for her boundless energy, work ethic, and sense of self-importance and control. As the sine qua non of artistic perfection and refinement, Bernhardt in return provided Floridians with a vision of themselves—independent, enterprising—and undertook their cultural apprenticeship to that end.

Notes

¹ “Mme. Bernhardt Takes Life Easy: Jacksonville Manager Talks of Tour of the World’s Greatest Actress,” *Pensacola Journal*, March 2, 1906.

² William Stronge, *The Sunshine Economy: A Economic History of Florida since the Civil War* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008); Gregg Turner, *A Journey into Florida Railroad History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008); Tracy J. Revels, *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011).

³ Janis Bergman-Carton, “Negotiating the Categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the Possibilities of Jewishness,” *Art Journal* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 55-64.

⁴ ‘*Sociétaire*’ referred to an actor or actress who received a share of the theatrical company’s profits.

⁵ Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 16-17.

⁶ Elinor Accampo, Mary Lynn Stewart, and Rachel Fuchs, eds., *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform, 1870-1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Karen Offen, Leslie Hume, and Erna Hellerstein, eds., *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in England, France, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981).

⁷ James Macmillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914* (London: Routledge, 2000), 144.

⁸ Mary Lou Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187.

⁹ John Kobler, “Bernhardt in America,” *American Heritage Magazine* 40, no. 5 (July/Aug. 1989).

¹⁰ Izard Forrest, *Sarah Bernhardt: An Appreciation* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1915), 42.

¹¹ Glenn, *The Female Spectacle*, 16-17. Bernhardt also managed and directed the Théâtre de la Renaissance from 1893 to 1899.

¹² As quoted in Forrest, *Sarah Bernhardt*, 28.

¹³ Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma double vie* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1907). An alternate account of this tour is provided by Marie Colombier, a disgruntled member of

Bernhardt's troupe who eventually became her rival. See *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amerique* (Paris: C. Marpon, n.d.).

¹⁴ Kobler, "Bernhardt in America."

¹⁵ Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 12-13.

¹⁶ Patricia Marks, *Sarah Bernhardt's First American Theatrical Tour, 1880-1881* (London: McFarland and Company, 2003), 31.

¹⁷ Lois Foster Rodecape, "'Quand Même': A Few California Footnotes to the Biography of Sarah Bernhardt," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (June 1941): 126-146; William Marion Miller and Phyllis J. Heckathorn, "Sarah Bernhardt in Ohio," *The French Review* 26, no. 1 (Oct. 1952): 32-39; Judy Baker Goss and David Ritchey, "Sarah Bernhardt's First Farewell Tour, 1905-1906: Little Rock Arkansas Welcomes Camille," *Central States Speech Journal* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 360-367.

¹⁸ Simone de la Souchère Deléry, "Sarah Bernhardt in the Deep South," *The French Review* 27, no. 4 (Feb. 1954): 269-274.

¹⁹ Sandy Lesberg and Mariana Fitzpatrick, eds., *The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt: Early Childhood through the First American Tour* (New York: Peebles Press, 1977), 181.

²⁰ Bernhardt, *Ma Double Vie*, 428-440.

²¹ Miller and Heckathorn, "Sarah Bernhardt in Ohio," 35; Marks, *Sarah Bernhardt's First American Theatrical Tour*, 1; Kobler, "Bernhardt in America."

²² Kobler, 2.

²³ Joel Shrock, *The Gilded Age* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Company, 2004), 2.

²⁴ Henry Blumenthal, *American and French Culture, 1800-1900: Interchanges in Art, Science, Literature, and Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975); Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper Middle Classes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁵ Leanne Zawelski, "Alexandre Cabanel's Portraits of the American 'Aristocracy' of the Early Gilded Age," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2005), accessed May 16, 2014, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/component/content/article/64-spring05article/300--alexandre-cabanel-portraits-of-the-american-aristocracy-of-the-early-gilded-age>

²⁶ Lew Pyenson, *Civilizing Mission: Exact Science and French Overseas Expansion, 180-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alice Conklin, Sarah Fishman, and Robert Zaretsky, *France and Its Empire since 1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

- ²⁷ Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Amelia Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
- ²⁸ Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 1, 10.
- ²⁹ John J. Guthrie, Jr., "Seeking the Sweet Spirit of Harmony: Establishing a Spiritualist Community at Cassadaga, Florida, 1893-1933," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 4.
- ³⁰ Jim Robison and Mark Andrews, *Flashbacks: The Story of Central Florida's Past* (Orlando: Tribune Publishing, 1995), 150-151.
- ³¹ Rembert W. Patrick, ed., *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964), xii.
- ³² Tommy R. Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines, 1870-1970," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5.
- ³³ Michael Gannon, ed., *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).
- ³⁴ Joel M. Hoffman, "From Augustine to Tangerine: Florida at the U.S. World's Fairs," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 23, Florida Theme Issue (1998): 50.
- ³⁵ Hoffman, "From Augustine to Tangerine," 49-50.
- ³⁶ Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines," 3-5.
- ³⁷ Durward Long, "The Making of Modern Tampa: A City of the New South, 1885-1911," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (April 1971), 340.
- ³⁸ Guthrie Jr., "Seeking the Sweet Spirit of Harmony," 2.
- ³⁹ Howard Lawrence Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885-1935* (Knoxville: University Press of Tennessee, 1991).
- ⁴⁰ Thompson, "Florida in American Popular Magazines," 4.
- ⁴¹ Lawrence S. Thompson, "Foreign Travellers in Florida, 1900-1950," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (October 1952): 92-94. Of the sixty-two travel books examined by Lawrence Thompson, half of their authors travelled to Miami while only a quarter went to Jacksonville. Tampa and Palm Beach were also listed as two other major destinations.
- ⁴² Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 155.
- ⁴³ Rodecape, "Quand Môme," 127.

⁴⁴ According to the article, there was to have been a “specially constructed stage in the dining room of the big hotel.” See “Bernhardt: The Great Sarah to Appear in this City March 13 Next,” *Tampa Tribune*, Jan. 30, 1906, 1; “How Sarah Bernhardt Whips Fate,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, May 6, 1906, 30.

⁴⁵ “Bernhardt: The Great Sarah to Appear in this City March 13 Next,” *Tampa Tribune*, January 30, 1906, 1. According to Rodecape, Bernhardt made \$7,100 on the first day of ticket sales in San Francisco during her 1886 tour. See ““Quand Môme,”” 127. Her ability to command high fees continued well into the twentieth century as evidenced by the receipt of \$7,000 on the first day of ticket sales in Chicago, the site of her first performance in 1905. See *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 15, 1905, 7. The difference in revenue between these cities and Tampa thus indicate that Bernhardt was playing to noticeably smaller audiences in Florida. However, Bernhardt made three times as much money in Tampa than she did in Youngstown and Dayton, Ohio. See Miller and Heckathorn, “Bernhardt in Ohio,” 37.

⁴⁶ Long, “The Making of Modern Tampa,” 340.

⁴⁷ As quoted in Seth Bramson, “A Tale of Three Henrys,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. 23, The Florida Issue (1998): 116.

⁴⁸ Bramson, “A Tale of Three Henrys,” 124.

⁴⁹ Miller and Heckathorn, “Bernhardt in Ohio,” 37; *Gainesville Daily Sun*, February 1, 1906, 4.

⁵⁰ *The Champion*, March 15, 1906.

⁵¹ *Pensacola Journal*, March 23, 1906, 4.

⁵² Steve Travis, “The Rise and Fall of the Theatrical Syndicate,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 10, no. 1 (March 1958): 36.

⁵³ Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Sarah Bernhardt*, Google Books (2003), 110, accessed December 17, 2013, http://books.google.com/books?id=_nXAx2NmdtMC&pg=PA104&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁵⁴ Monroe Lippmann, “Battle for Bookings: Independents Challenge the Trust,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 2, no. 2 (February 1958): 38-46.

⁵⁵ *New York Tribune*, June 29, 1905, 6. After Bernhardt sailed into New York, she was transported to Chicago where she opened her 1905-1906 at the Grand Opera House in late November. Two weeks later, she returned to New York to perform at the Lyric Theater. See *New York Daily Times*, November 15, 1905, 9.

- ⁵⁶ “Combination of Actors: Formed in New York City to Wage War Against the Theatrical Trust,” *Pensacola Journal*, July 15, 1905. There would be three more tours in 1910-11, 1912-13, and 1916-17.
- ⁵⁷ *The Sun*, December 30, 1905, 9.
- ⁵⁸ “How Sarah Bernhardt Whips Fate,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, May 6, 1906, 30.
- ⁵⁹ “Mme. Bernhardt Takes Life Easy,” *Pensacola Journal*, March 2, 1906.
- ⁶⁰ “How Sarah Bernhardt Whips Fate,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, May 6, 1906, 30.
- ⁶¹ *The Sun*, December 30, 1905, 9.
- ⁶² Marks, *Bernhardt’s First American Tour*, 3.
- ⁶³ Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 217.
- ⁶⁴ *New York Daily Times*, November 18, 1905, 7.
- ⁶⁵ “Returned Home After Seeing The ‘Divine Sarah,’” *Ocala Banner*, March 23, 1906, 12.
- ⁶⁶ *The Champion*, March 1, 1906; “Sarah Bernhardt to be in Jacksonville March the Fourteenth,” *Ocala Banner*, March 2, 1906, 6.
- ⁶⁷ Marks, *Bernhardt’s First American Tour*, 3.
- ⁶⁸ As quoted in Forrest, *Sarah Bernhardt*, 48.
- ⁶⁹ “Red Hair and Genius,” *Ocala Evening Star*, April 24, 1901.
- ⁷⁰ *The New Enterprise*, September 26, 1901. This paper ran from 1901-1908.
- ⁷¹ *The New Enterprise*, January 9, 1902, 1.
- ⁷² *Ocala Banner*, December 1, 1905, 7.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1908; <http://www.marthastewart.com/334207/sarah-bernhardt-cookies> (accessed May 6, 2017); “Taft Cocktail Is All The Rage,” *Pensacola Journal*, Oct. 30, 1909, 1.
- ⁷⁴ Pleasant Daniel Gold, *History of Duval County* (Saint Augustine: The Record Company, 1928), 197; Frederick T. Davis, *A History of Jacksonville* (Florida Historical Society, 1925), 343.
- ⁷⁵ Bramson, “A Tale of Three Henrys,” 135.
- ⁷⁶ Bramson, 130.
- ⁷⁷ Gold, *History of Duval County*, 197.
- ⁷⁸ Gold, 208.
- ⁷⁹ *Florida Times Union*, February 16 and 27, 1906.

⁸⁰ Columbia, South Carolina State, March 11, 1905, Issue 1: 5. This event was scheduled for April 10-12, 1906.

⁸¹ Federal Writers' Project, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, 155.

⁸² Grier Moffat Williams, "A History of Music in Jacksonville, Florida from 1822 to 1922," (PhD Dissertation, Florida State University, 1961), 125.

⁸³ Federal Writers' Project, *Florida: A Guide*, 155.

⁸⁴ Williams, "A History," 125.

⁸⁵ "Sarah Bernhardt to be in Jacksonville March the Fourteenth," *Ocala Banner*, March 2, 1906, 6.

⁸⁶ *Florida Times Union*, March 3, 1906.

⁸⁷ *Florida Times Union*, March 12, 1906.

⁸⁸ "Sarah Bernhardt to be in Jacksonville March the Fourteenth," *Ocala Banner*, March 2, 1906, 6.

⁸⁹ "Mme. Bernhardt Takes Life Easy," *Pensacola Journal*, March 2, 1906.

⁹⁰ "To See the Great Bernhardt," *Ocala Banner*, March 16, 1906, 1.

⁹¹ *The Weekly True Democrat*, March 16, 1906, 5.

⁹² *Ocala Evening Star*, March 15, 1906, 1.

⁹³ *Florida Times Union*, March 15, 1906; Williams, "A History," 125.

⁹⁴ *St. Lucie County Tribune*, March 16, 1906, 4.

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