

The greatest stage actress

By Zafar Masud

Art

'*QUAND même*' pronounced in the blandest of tones could signify "just the same" in English. But imagine someone blurting out those two French words, defiantly stamping a foot, and the meaning transforms into an indignant "come on, gimme a break!" ... or something to that effect.

Sarah Bernhardt started using the expression at age eight and did it with such obstinate determination all her life that it was later developed by one of her artist admirers into a coat of arms of sorts, with a ribbon bearing the words '*quand même*' wrapped around the letters SB, her initials.

Born in Paris in 1844, Sarah Bernhardt had originally wanted to be a nun and was poised to join a convent for that purpose at age 15. Then, one fateful day, the Duke of Morny, a friend of the family, heard her reciting *Two Pigeons*, a fable by La Fontaine whom people from all the cultures of the world are familiar with. "You know where you must take your daughter..." he advised her mother, "...to the conservatory of performing arts."

Thus began a legendary theatrical career that would last more than seven decades, until her final moment literally. It would take her to the most celebrated theatres in Europe and the Americas and would earn her the sobriquet 'La Divine' as well as the honour of being "the greatest stage actress ever", a reputation that goes unchallenged even today, nearly 90 years after her death.

The audiences, not to forget the critics, marvelled not only over La Divine's total mastery of classical roles, Cleopatra, Theodora, Phaedra and Joan of Arc among them, but also over her excellence in contemporary plays by Ibsen, George Sand and Alexander Dumas. Oscar Wilde paid her the ultimate compliment when he said he could only understand the musicality of Racine's text after watching Sarah Bernhardt perform in *Phaedra*.

With the phenomenal control she had of her vocal chords, she frequently asked for, and did with perfection, men's roles in a number of plays, the most famous of them being Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

As geniuses rarely go without eccentricities, Sarah Bernhardt expressed hers through the habit of sleeping in an oak coffin that she had ordered made to her measure. "It helps me understand tragic roles better", she would say by way of explanation. Paris never hesitated from paying tributes to its famous citizen. The main theatre in the French capital is dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt's name and her dressing room there, intact with its marble washbasin and bathtub, can be visited by tourists. A granite statue in the role of Phaedra stands in front of the Bank of France building in the old business quarter of Paris.

Although she avidly played many tragic roles, Sarah Bernhardt refused to accept personal tragedy as a fatality. Her modest family background in an age of privileges and class division never came in her way to attain the artistic heights she did. The final scene of *La Tosca* in which she performed in 1905 on the stage in Rio de Janeiro, required her to jump off a high wall. The rough stunt caused her severe knee injury that slowly developed into gangrene through the coming years.

The amputation of her right leg at the height of her career never doused the flame of her enthusiasm for theatre. She would perform on the stage with undaunted vigour for another decade or so, and would continue her European and transatlantic tours with the same energy until her death.

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Sarah Bernhardt rejected the proposal of wearing a prosthetic leg, saying that would make her feel "artificial". However, the power and the charm of her voice were so overwhelming the audiences would never notice that La Divine had not moved an inch from the same spot throughout the performance.

As Sarah Bernhardt's own tumultuous life was drawing towards the drop scene, new technologies had begun making forays into the world of performed arts. She plunged into these uncharted waters with characteristic ardour, making more than a dozen recordings of her celebrated roles on the Edison cylinder, the grandfather of our compact disc.

She also replicated her famous stage roles such as Hamlet, La Tosca, Queen Elizabeth I of England and many others in the then nascent medium of silent motion pictures and ended up making no less than 11 films, the last being *The Fortune Teller* with its shooting concluding practically on her deathbed in 1923.

'Superstar' is a title the media bestow unhesitatingly upon every flash in the pan celebrity today; but if someone truly merited the honour, it was undoubtedly La Divine. The description of this fabulous career would not be complete without mentioning that apart from her autobiography, *My Double Life*, Sarah Bernhardt also wrote about a dozen plays, books on the art of theatre and other memoirs.

Here was a woman who had made her life all by herself and with nothing else to help her but her extraordinary talent and her incredibly fervid personality.

And she always had a lot to do! She famously wrote in her autobiography: "Life is too short ...even for those who live for a long time!"

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