The Evolution of the Actress:

From the 16th Century to Sarah Bernhardt

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Outline

Thesis: Sarah Bernhardt’s fame and notoriety in film and on the French stage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries made being an actress a respectable job for women in European society.

I. Introduction: Sarah Bernhardt strongly influenced the respectability of being an actress.
   A. Brief outline of how actresses were perceived in society in each century.

II. Views on female actresses prior to Bernhardt’s time.
   A. Women in theatre during the 16th Century
      1. Women in Shakespearean theatre
         a. Women’s roles were played by young boys.
      2. Commedia dell’Arte – Italian improvised drama
         a. A type of masked theatre that usually had a family for its cast, with a husband and wife.
         b. Despite opposition, this type of theatre gave women a place on the stage.
   B. Women in theatre during the 17th Century
      2. Actresses of this time were considered unwomanly and improper as they had to put themselves on public display in order to work.
   C. Women in theatre during the 18th and early 19th Centuries.
      1. Women during the 18th and 19th centuries often led boring lives as they weren’t allowed to do what men took part in.
2. Aristocratic libertinism- the activity in the high society of France of pursuing the pleasures of the flesh.
   a. Seduction was a game; when actresses came along, men of high society preferred them as opposed to high-born women because they weren’t married and were seen as exotic.
   b. Previous to their acting careers, many actresses had been prostitutes; they were known for their bad morals.
   c. Allowed actresses to make a name for themselves in the courts.
3. Actresses in the 19th century started to make a career out of acting, but were still dominated by males in society.

III. Sarah Bernhardt’s rise to fame.
   A. Early life of Sarah Bernhardt
   B. 1870- more roles were available to women
      a. Gave Sarah the chance to start her career.

IV. The works of Sarah Bernhardt
   A. Queen Elizabeth (1912)
      1. Bernhardt’s style of acting- exaggerated movement in silent films.
   B. *The Art of the Theatre* (1924)
      1. A book written by Bernhardt on acting; shows that actresses were more respectable during this time and the hurdles they had overcome in European society.

V. Commending the work of Sarah Bernhardt and her life.
   A. James Agate- friend of Bernhardt
VI. Conclusion: Evidence that there was a major increase in the number of actresses during the Victorian era and how that relates to Sarah Bernhardt’s career.
Looking back in history, it can be easily argued that the role of the actress in society has gone through a notable evolution. During the 16th century, it was a rare occurrence for a woman to be seen on stage. Women’s roles were played by young boys. It wasn’t until the 17th century that women first appeared on the English and Parisian stages. However, it was considered improper because women were expected to remain in the shadows, and actresses had to put themselves on display in order to work. As the role of actresses evolved and they were seen more frequently on stage, society considered them to have bad morals and be prostitutes. It wasn’t until the late 19th century that the view of an actress in society had reached a respectable level. This change was caused, in part, by Sarah Bernhardt. Sarah Bernhardt’s fame and notoriety in film and on the French stage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries made being an actress a respectable job for women in European society.

During the Elizabethan era in the 16th century, it was commonplace for a young apprentice boy to play a woman’s role on stage. Lisa Jardine commented that this switching of gender roles was universal and was, therefore disregarded by the audience.1 Women were not seen on the European stage during this time. However, in Southern France women were making strides and were seen on the French stage. “[S]outhern France’s records [show] that in 1509 at

Romans a production of the mystery play *Le Mystère des Trois Doms* designated all but one of the female roles to women. These women performers all came from the local nobility and, with two exceptions, were married."² Women were also making strides in Italy with the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. The reason women were able to take part in this type of theatre was the fact that *commedia dell’arte* troupes were family based.³ Husbands and wives worked together as teams.⁴ Not only were these women seen on stage, they were also praised for their work. “The *commedia* actresses often received high praise for their many talents – singing, dancing, playing guitar and bass-viol, and the writing of poetry.”⁵

While it seemed as though actresses were making a mark on the European stages and gaining some respectability, actresses were never regularly employed.⁶ It wasn’t until the 17⁷th century that women first appeared on the English and Parisian stages. The acceptance of women on stage was not due to the fact that society saw them as superior to boys. Colley Cibber hypothesized that watching a woman play a woman’s role allowed theatre to evolve and become better.⁷ Playwrights began writing women’s roles intending for women to play them, which added a depth not seen in theatre before.⁸

It was during the 17⁷th century that actresses began to be used mainly as sexual objects whose sexuality was exploited on stage.⁹ “Actresses were frequently required to do no more than

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² Ferris, 36-37.
³ Ferris, 39.
⁴ Ferris, 39.
⁵ Ferris, 39.
⁷ Howe, 19-20.
⁸ Howe, 20.
⁹ Howe, 37.
pose, like pictures or statues, to be gazed upon and desired by male characters in the play and, presumably, by male spectators.”

In 17th century plays, not only was sensuality highly used, but also violence towards women. “Stabbing was very popular, offering as it did the striking image of a naked bosom spattered with blood.” Violence on stage created sexual thrills for spectators. The 17th century gave actresses the reputation of being whores, which stayed with the profession for about another century.

It is widely known that women in the 18th and early 19th centuries had a specific place in society that did not allow them to do what men could. Edward Carpenter described in his autobiography that, “…girls of whom I least expected it told me that their lives were miserable ‘with nothing on earth to do’” It was no wonder that women felt this way as they were expected to remain in the house and make sure the servants did what needed to be done. Women who did otherwise were considered “redundant.” This was another reason as to why actresses of the time were looked down upon. However, one must not disregard the hurdles that actresses had overcome throughout the years prior to the 18th century.

The late 17th century introduced the idea of aristocratic libertinism, which can be defined as an activity in the high society of France in which individuals pursued the pleasures of the flesh- extramarital affairs and mistresses. Theatre women began to take part in these practices around the 1670s and became known for their bad morals. Actresses had advantages over high-

10 Howe, 39.
11 Howe, 43.
12 Howe, 43.
14 Finney, 2.
16 Berlanstein, 38.
born women in the game of aristocratic libertinism because they were seen as exotic to the men of the court and they were not married, nor were they expected to marry. 17 Since, actresses were desirable, they “[turned] the selling of [their bodies] to a refined art.” 18 While actresses of the time were known as slaves to their sexuality and many had worked as prostitutes before turning to acting, their participation in aristocratic libertinism can be seen as one way they gained respect in high society during that time.

The early 19th century served as a period in which actresses began to make a positive mark on the profession. They were earning wages (generally equal to men), actresses enjoyed freedoms unknown to women in other professions, and they were in an occupation exclusively for women, and therefore did not affect the wages of men, allowing them to keep their jobs. 19 Despite these advances, actresses still had to deal with working in a male-dominated society and the fact that they were defying the cultural norms of women during that era. Tracy Davis states in her book Actresses as Working Women, “Social respectability was merited as long as women met the views prescribed for their age and class, but actresses – virtually by definition – lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety. Victorians were deeply suspicious of women whose livelihood depended on skills of deception and dissembling, and the circumstances of actresses’ worked belied any pretences to sexual naïveté, middle-class immobility, or feeble brain power.” 20

17 Berlanstein, 39.
18 Berlanstein, 39-40.
20 Davis, 3.
While actresses were still looked down upon, they were making strides during the Victorian era in advancing themselves professionally. This can be attributed, in part, to the fame and notoriety of the actress Sarah Bernhardt whose career led a revolt against Victorian restrictions on women. Bernhardt glorified the profession of acting, making it seem as if it was unattainable to the average person.

Bernhardt was born in Paris on October 23, 1844 to parents Edouard Bernhardt and Julie Van Hard.21 Her parents were not married, which made her an illegitimate child, and her father traveled around the world, causing Sarah to live with her mother and rarely see her father.22 At the age of fifteen and a half, Sarah and her mother were not getting along, and it was proposed that she enter the theatre because she had completed her studies, but was unable to start a career as most women during that time did not work.23 Verneuil states in his biography of Bernhardt that, “[i]n order to get away from her mother, whose life as a kept woman shocked her, Sarah replied [to the proposition of becoming an actress]: “All right, let us try.” It is hard to believe that this is exactly how was decided the career of a woman who was destine to become the greatest artist in the world.”24

Her career in the theatre began in October 1860, when she auditioned for the Conservatoire in France.25 Her inexperience was made evident when, at her audition, she was unaware that she needed to bring a scene partner, so she quickly decided that she would recite a

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22 Verneuil, 29. 
23 Verneuil, 39. 
24 Verneuil, 41. 
25 Verneuil, 42.
fable. At first, the directors were shocked and considered it a joke, but Sarah’s personality showed through performance and she was among the 15 to 20 who were accepted into the Conservatoire. Thus, began the sparkling career of Sarah Bernhardt.

It can be argued that Sarah Bernhardt’s career was able to flourish, because in 1870 more roles were available for women. Gail Finney states in the introduction of her book *Women in Modern Drama* that “…the reasons for this sudden flowering of stage heroines can be found in the immense upheavals in the condition of women at the turn of the century, changes by which no dramatist of the day could remain unaffected.” As mentioned before, women often led boring lives. They were unable to work and spent their time making sure the servants completed their tasks and their husbands were happy. The fact that women were starting to make a place for themselves in society allowed for Sarah Bernhardt to pave her own path and start a career in a profession that had been looked down upon for centuries before.

Sarah spent fifty-one years in the theatre (from 1862-1913), working in such theatres as the Odéon, the Comédie Française, and touring in Europe and the Americas. Her success is evident in her autobiography *My Double Life*, in which she states, “We left Chicago to go to Saint Louis, which we reached after travelling two hundred eighty-three miles in fourteen hours. In my drawing room on the train Abbey and Jarrett showed me the grand total for the sixty-two performances since we had left France: 227,459 dollars – i.e. 1,37,284 francs – an average of

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26 Verneuil, 42.  
27 Verneuil, 42-43.  
28 Finney, 1.  
29 Finney, 1.  
30 Verneuil, 62, 89, 188.
18,343 francs for each performance.”

Sarah Bernhardt had not only changed European society’s view on the actress, but had also made a strikingly notable career for herself out of the profession.

In order to give Sarah Bernhardt the credit of putting a new face on the career of acting for women, it is important to look at what made her such a distinctive actress and relate that to the changes she created. In the preface of her memoir, Victoria Larson commends the work of Bernhardt and calls her style of acting, “…a blend of romantic passion combined with academic technique, dedicated often to the presentation of dying heroines in plays by conventional dramatists…” Bernhardt’s passion can be attributed to her success. Larson states that, “…Sarah had a powerfully charismatic stage presence that overrode the boundaries of time and makes her memory live: in Sarah’s case it seems to have been a compound of her remarkable and beautiful voice and crystalline intonation, her ability to represent and induce intense emotion, and her physical grace.” Her passion and grace can be seen in her performance in the silent film Queen Elizabeth (1912). In this performance, Bernhardt uses over exaggerated movements and dramatic faces- a type of acting that would captivate any viewer. Bernhardt’s style of acting and the passion she put into each performance, as mentioned before, can be attributed as causing her success. This success is what led to the change in society’s viewpoint towards actresses.

In 1923, the year of her death, Bernhardt wrote what can be called an “instruction manual” for the actor. The Art of Theatre covers everything from the physical qualities to the

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33 Bernhardt, My Double Life, viii.

moral qualities needed by the actor, and ends with how to deal with the criticisms of audiences and a reflection on the memories of her career. The fact that Sarah Bernhardt, an actress, published a book in which she instructs the reader on what is deemed necessary for an actor and ends with her own reflections on her career, shows that she had conquered society’s centuries old condescending outlook on actresses. She made being an actress a respectable job in European society and paved the way for future actresses.

James Agate, a friend of Bernhardt, wrote the preface to her book The Art of Theatre. In his preface, Agate recalls a memory he had of Bernhardt when she was teaching a class at her theatre in Paris. He states, “The pupils, nearly all young girls, though here and there an actress with a foot on a lower rung of the professional ladder, sat round the back of the stage in a semicircle. There was something of the whispering hush of an excited congregation. And then Sarah appeared.” Agate also quotes a Mr. Maurice Baring, “For Bernhardt’s art, Mr. Baring tells us, was a complex whole made up of rhythmical movement, gesture, look, speech, hands, hair, body and spirit.” These two quotes serve as evidence to the fact that Sarah Bernhardt defied European society’s views on actresses in two ways: one way being the fact that she was revered and respected not only by her pupils, but also by important men of the time. The second way is the fact that a female was teaching a group of young females the art of acting, as Agate recalled in his anecdote found in his preface. Centuries prior this would have been unheard of. Being an actress was finally seen as a respectable job in society.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a major increase in the number of actresses. The published censuses of England and Wales showed that there were approximately three-hundred

36 Bernhardt, The Art of Theatre, 7.
and thirty-three female actors in 1841. In 1871, when there was said to have been an increase in the number of roles available to women and when Sarah Bernhardt began working, there were approximately one-thousand six hundred and ninety three female actors. By the time Bernhart had made a notable profession out of acting and two years before her death, there were approximately three-thousand six hundred and ninety six female actors. Just the increase in the number of actresses during the Victorian Era proves the advances women had made in the career of acting and their position in European society, many of which were due to Bernhardt.

Over the centuries, actresses have overcome many hurdles to achieve a respectable place in society. It can be said that the profession for women evolved over the centuries to a respectable one. By 1870, more roles were available to women. However, Sarah Bernhardt’s fame and notoriety can be seen as what allowed the profession of acting for women to achieve complete respectability in European society.

37 Davis, 10.
38 Davis, 10.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Secondary Sources
In olden days, people believed that the universe and life on it was an act and result of God’s creation. There was, however, no evidence to support these claims. The early scientists and Greeks believed that life on earth never began on earth itself. They believed that it came from somewhere else in outer space and they named this phenomenon panspermia. Survival of the fittest—Darwin’s theory of natural selection thus believes that those who can survive till the end are the ones that nature selects. Solved Example for You. Q: Who postulated the theory of chemical evolution? Lamarck. Miller and Urey. The theory of evolution continues to be packed with these fascinating questions and more! These popular words were said by Malcolm Muggeridge. Little did the English journalist know that Darwin’s theory of evolution would go on to gain more than just a little credibility with time. The predominant basis of the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin is that all species are related in origin. One can always find the theories of change. If you go to the ancient Greeks, there was a philosopher called Thales, who thought that everything was water and everything emerged from a primordial substance called water. That is not exactly true, but it is an evolutionary theory. One can trace it all the way through. Genetics of the Nature. He lived in the times of the French Revolution. He was a protege of a very famous biologist called Buffon. Buffon was a great systematist he went out and he studied animals. And he wrote an enormous book, Histoire Naturelle, there were many-many volumes, where he simply described animals across the world. He tried to classify them and he classified them, quite predictably, on the level of increasing sophistication.