

Rosine Bernardt, AKA Sarah Bernhardt; b. 22 October, 1844; d. 26 March, 1923.

Stage and Screen actress; mistress of Henri, Prince de Ligne of Belgium; rumored mistress of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales.

Sarah Bernhardt, also known as “The Devine Sarah” was born illegitimately of Jewish ancestry in Paris in October 1844. There is much discussion concerning her life pre-stage, as it appears Ms. Bernhardt frequently embellished or altered her early years to fit her image. It is clear that she first attended a convent school near Versailles; and in 1860 joined the Conservatoire de Musique at Déclamation in Paris, from where she went on to be a student at the famous Comédie Française.

Bernhardt’s life on the stage began in 1862, however by 1864 she had given birth to the son of the Belgian Prince Henri, Prince de Ligne following a scandalous affair. The Royal family refused to allow Henri to marry Sarah however; and by 1865 she had become a courtesan. This was the period of the much talked about “coffin” in which she would receive visitors and often sleep in, claiming that it aided her artistic studies for taking on “tragic” roles.

Sarah gradually built up her repertoire and, thanks to both her looks and her not insignificant acting ability, became much in demand throughout Europe and the United States, ultimately (and unusually for a woman) playing the title role in Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”. Bernhardt also studied painting and sculpture, exhibiting at the *Salon* from 1874 – 1886. Her decorative Bronze inkwell in the Art Nouveau style of a self-portrait with bat wings and fish tail is recognized as a highly significant work of art. And Alphonse Mucha, the quintessential artist of the Art Nouveau period, used Bernhardt as the inspiration for several of his works.

With the advent of the era of movies, Bernhardt quickly adapted to the new medium. She starred in eight motion pictures and two bio-pics, including *Sarah Bernhardt à Belle-Isle* (1912), a film about her home life. She has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 1751 Vine Street.

In 1915, Bernhardt’s right leg was amputated following the onset of gangrene, a result of an unhealed injury from a fall 10 years earlier. However, this did little more than inconvenience the indefatigable Ms. Bernhardt, who went on to undertake a successful tour of the United States in 1915 and continued to star in her own productions until her death in 1923.

Bernhardt’s rumored liaison with Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, has never received the same attention as those of some of her contemporaries, i.e. Daisy Greville, Lillie Langty and Alice Keppel. Nevertheless, those rumors have not diminished with time and it is highly likely that the actress, who had already fathered a son for one “King-in-waiting” was viewed with considerable interest by “Bertie”, the British monarch to be.