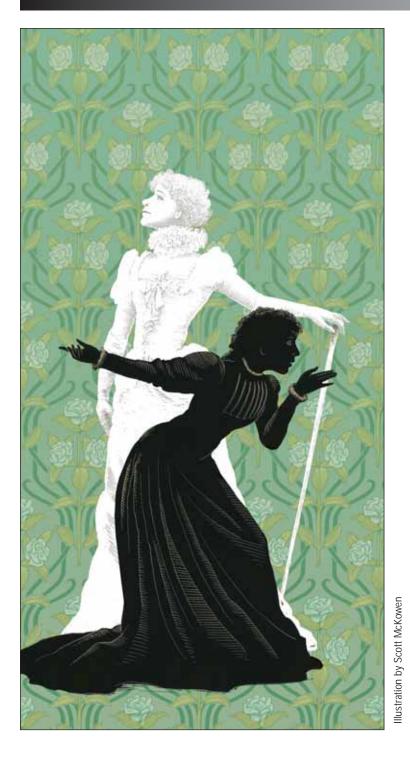


M A R C H 2 O O 6



# The Ladies Cofthellias

By Lillian Groag Directed by Casey Stangl Space Theatre MAR 16 - APR 22

PRODUCING PARTNERS:

Renée & John HURLEY

SPONSORED BY:





#### 

## Denver Center Theatre Company

A division of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts

STEINBERG











Administration 303.893.4000 Box Office 303.893.4100 DENVERCENTER.ORG

## Synopsis

SARAH: People don't pay hundreds of francs to see "simple." If they want "simple" they should go watch the ducks paddle about in the pond. "Simple" has an unpleasant odor of "ordinary" and no one goes to the theatre to see "ordinary," darling.

—The Ladies of the Camellias

In this imagined meeting in Paris, 1897, the two great theatre divas of the day—Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse—were scheduled to perform in back-to-back productions of La Dame aux Camélias (The Lady of the Camellias) written by Alexandre Dumas fils (the younger). In a theatre owned by Bernhardt, both women are in their dressing rooms while their entourages speculate on what will happen when they meet. Flavio Ando, Duse's leading man, and Gustave-Hippolyte Worms, Sarah's leading man, discuss the eccentricities and caprices of their respective star managers, while Monsieur Benôit, the prompter, must deal with the ingénue's resignation, the appearance of Sarah's pet snakes, and the Act II curtains that have been chewed to pieces by Sarah's pet cheetah. All are joined by Dumas fils, the playwright, who has dropped by to offer best wishes and a few suggestions to both actresses. But just before the convergence of the divas, all on stage are suddenly taken hostage by a terrorist!

In this *divertissement*, a comic fantasy of "what ifs," we hear the thoughts and ideas of two magnificent performers of their age and we are given a glimpse into what makes—or not—the magic of live theatre.

DUSE: Oh, yes. Not only am I now expected to change color, but as a famous actress I am also expected to give off light, like some tropical insect. I do hope there are some people in the audience who will come just to see me act.

—The Ladies of the Camellias

### The Playwright

illian Groag's produced plays include *The Ladies of the Camellias* (eight Drama-Logue Awards) in Los Angeles at the West End Playhouse and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and *The White Rose* at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, the WPA Theatre in New York and productions across the country. Recent commissions include *Bone* (Old Globe Theatre) and *The Magic Fire* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival). Her translations include Feydeau's *A Flaw in the Ointment* with William Gray at Seattle Rep, which she also directed; and Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio*. Directing credits include *Chilean Holiday* at Actors' Theatre of Louisville, *Der Fliegende Hollander* and *Die Fledermaus* at the Virginia Opera and *The Tempest* at the California Shakespeare Festival in Berkeley. She also has directed *Tosca* and the world premiere of Thea Musgrave's *Simón Bolivar* at the Virginia Opera. Recently, she took part as a director in the Sundance Institute Playwrights Lab.

roag also is an actress and has appeared on Broadway and in the leading resident theatres of the United States. She appeared at the Kennedy Center in the Pulitzer prize-winning *The Kentucky Cycle*. She is a founding member and one of three managers of the Antaeus Project which began at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and is an Associate Artist of the Old Globe.

www. Kennedy-Center.org/programs/theatre/fnap/Garrett.html

### Sarah Bernhardt, abbreviated biography.

"It was the curtain of my life which was rising."
—Sarah Bernhardt on seeing her first performance at the Comédie-Française.1.

arah Bernhardt was born Henriette Rosine Bernard in 1844, the illegitimate child of Judith Van Hard, a Jewish-Dutch courtesan and Edouard Bernard, a law student. As the presence of a baby interfered with her mother's life, Sarah was brought up at first in a *pension* and later, in a convent. A difficult, willful child of delicate health, she wanted to become a nun, but one of her mother's lovers, the Duc de Morny, Napoleon III's half brother, decided she should be an actress. When she was 16, he arranged for her to enter the *Conservatoire*, the government-sponsored school of acting. She was not considered a particularly promising student and, although she revered some of her teachers, she thought the *Conservatoire*'s methods antiquated.

Sarah left the *Conservatoire* in 1862, and thanks to the Duc de Morny's influence, was accepted by the national theatre company, the *Comédie*-

Française, as a beginner on probation. During the obligatory three debuts required of probationers, she was scarcely noticed by the critics. Her contract with the Comédie-Française was canceled in 1863 after she had slapped the face of a senior actress who had been rude to her younger sister. For a time she found employment at the Théâtre du Gymnase-Dramatique. After playing the role of a foolish Russian princess, she entered a period of soul-searching, questioning her talent for acting. During these critical months she became the mistress of Henri, prince de Ligne, and gave birth to her only child, Maurice.

In 1866 she signed a contract with the *Odéon* theatre and, during six years of intensive work with a congenial company there, gradually established her reputation. Her first resounding success was as Anna Damby in the 1868 revival of *Kean*, by the novelist and playwright Alexandre Dumas

Continued on next page

*père* (the elder). Bernhardt's greatest triumph at the *Odéon*, however, came in 1869, when she played the minstrel Zanetto in the young dramatist François Coppée's one-act verse play *Le Passant* (*The Passerby*), a role that she also played in a command performance before Napoleon III.

uring the Franco-German War in 1870, she organized a military hospital in the *Odéon* theatre. After the war, the reopened *Odéon* paid tribute to France's great 19th century writer, Victor Hugo, with a production of his verse play *Ruy Blas*. As Queen Maria, Bernhardt charmed her audiences with the lyrical quality of her voice. It was then that Hugo coined the phrase "voix d'or" ("golden voice") though her critics described it as more silvery, resembling the tones of a flute.

In 1872 she left the *Odéon* and returned to the *Comédie-Française* where she scored a success in the title role in *Zaïre* by Voltaire. Generally, however, she was given only minor parts. When she got the chance to play the title role in Racine's *Phédre*—a part for which critics assumed she lacked the resources—her passionate performance made them revise their opinions. And her portrayal of Doña Sol in Hugo's *Hernani* is said to have brought tears to the author's eyes.

Despite being subject to almost paralyzing stage fright, an international career lay before her. Yet some critics still refused to succumb to her spell. The novelist Henry James commented about a performance in London on the "admirable delicacy and grace" with which she handled plaintive passages, but added that "in the violent scenes [of *Phédre*] she forces her note beyond all reason and becomes painfully shrill and modern." But London audiences loved her. Back home at the *Comédie-Françcaise*, however, she became overbearing and temperamental.

o in 1880, Bernhardt formed her own touring company and as its actor/manager, soon became an international idol. She appeared fairly regularly in England but extended her itinerary to the European continent, the United States and Canada. New York City saw her for the first time on November 8, 1880. Eight visits to the United States followed from 1891-93. She under-

took a world tour that included Australia and South America. All the audiences clamored to see her in two special roles: Marguerite Gautier, the redeemed courtesan, in *La Dame aux Camélias* by Dumas *fils* and the title role in *Adrienne Lecouvreur* by Éugene Scribe.

In the 1880s a new element had entered her artistic life with the emergence of Victorien Sardou as the pre-eminent playwright for melodrama. With Bernhardt in mind, Sardou wrote *Fedora* (1882), *Theodora* (1884), *La Tosca* (1887) and *Cléopâtre* (1890). Sardou, directing his own plays in which she starred, taught her a broad, flamboyant style of acting, relying for effect on lavish décors, exotic costumes and pantomimic action.

t about the same time Sarah fell passionately in love with Jacques Damala, an Lattaché to the Greek Diplomatic Corps in Paris. Although she had had numerous lovers, Jacques was handsome, insolent, vain and an established Don Juan. Sarah "auditioned" him and was convinced he had great talent; subsequently she cast him as the lover, Armand Duval, in La Dame Aux Camélias. But as an actor, Damala was atrocious, without qualifications, technique or timing and with an unintelligible Greek accent. Sarah was blind to his defects as an actor and as a human being; thus, in April, 1882, the giddy couple skipped off to London and was married. They returned to Paris where they both performed in La Dame Aux Camélias. Sarah was a triumph, but the critics were unimpressed by Jacques. He was furious with his notices and blamed his wife for his fiasco. In December, 1882, Sarah opened in Sardou's Fedora, again winning lavish praise, but Jacques was not impressed. He openly criticized and humiliated her before her friends while indulging himself in drugs and alcohol. When Sarah realized she was paying for her husband's costly purchases of drugs and other women, she protested loudly. Damala raged back with all kinds of accusations and the next morning, without notice, departed for North Africa.

Sarah, always frail, was down but not out. Forever extravagant, she was forced to sell her jewels, her carriages and a pair of beautiful horses to pay her, Jacques' and son Maurice's debts. Sardou appeared with a new play, *Theodora*, which allowed her to show off all of her fireworks and gem-encrusted wardrobe. Once again she was off on tour. Damala, from whom she was estranged (although they remained legally married and she continued to support him) died in 1889 at the age of 34.

In 1905, during a South American tour, she injured her right knee when jumping off the parapet in the last scene of *La Tosca*. By 1915 gangrene had set in and her leg had to be amputated. Carried about in a litter, the patriotic Bernhardt insisted on visiting the soldiers at the front during World War I. She completed another tour to the United States and one to Europe, playing parts she could act while seated. New roles were provided for her by the playwrights Louis Verneuil, Edmond and Maurice Rostand and Sasha Guitry.

he enjoyed painting and sculpting and wrote her autobiography in 1907 to counteract the slanderous and scabrous *Les Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt* written by Marie Colombier, who had capitalized on the actual and alleged eccentricities of Bernhardt's private life.

Bernhardt spent her last months with Maurice and his family and died in his arms in 1923.

"She has more than beauty. She is something better than an artist. She is a woman."

—Victor Hugo. 2.

"Bernhardt, Sarah." *New Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1992.

Skinner, Cornelia Otis. *Madame Sarah*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967.

- 1. Skinner, p. 24.
- 2. Skinner, p. 88.

# Eleonora Duse, abbreviated biography.

"Who is it that arrives at art without an understanding of life?"

—Eleonora Duse. I

leonora was born on October 3, 1859, allegedly in the third-class carriage of a Angelita Capeletto and Alessandro Duse, were part of a traveling troupe of actors, and she first performed with them at the age of four, playing Cosette in an adaptation of Victor Hugo's Les Misérables. Her childhood, dominated by poverty and disrupted by constant travel, was punctuated by her mother's death when Eleonora was only 13 years old. When her mother became ill, Duse had taken over her roles, portraying characters far too mature for her age. Her first critical success was at Verona in 1873 where she was acclaimed for her performance as Juliet in Romeo and Juliet. But her career really began in 1879 when she appeared in Emile Zola's Thérèse Raquin.

In Naples, Duse met the young journalist Mattino Cafiero and had her first serious love affair. It ended in disaster: Cafiero abandoned her in mid-pregnancy, her baby died, and shortly thereafter, Cafiero died as well. Duse then joined Cesare Rossi's company where she met Teobaldo Checchi, a fellow actor whom she married in 1881. Although they had a daughter, Duse was now preoccupied with her career and the marriage was a mere convenience. In 1885 Duse embarked on a South American tour with the Rossi company and promptly began an affair with her fellow actor, Flavio Ando. When Checchi learned of her indiscretion, he dissolved the marriage.

fter her return from South America in 1886, Duse formed her own company. By this time she had built up a broad and var-

ied repertoire including plays by Ibsen, Scribe, Zola, Corneille, Sardou, Shakespeare and Dumas *fils*. She never tired of playing Ibsen's heroines such as Nora in *A Doll's House*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler*. Later she added the playwrights Luigi Pirandello and Maxim Gorky to her list, but no playwright was ever more important to her than Gabriele d'Annunzio, whose plays she promoted and personally financed and produced. While appearing in his plays, Duse met Arrigo Boito, Verdi's librettist, and they had a passionate affair.

Duse and d'Annunzio became lovers in 1895; the relationship, interrupted by Duse's tours through Europe and the United States, remained frenzied and intense. From 1900 to 1911 Duse rented a villa at Settignano, Florence, her first real home, and for a brief period her life with d'Annunzio was productive and idyllic as well as passionate. He wrote for her *Francesca da Rimini*, *La Gioconda* and *L'Innocente*, among others.

he first two years of the 20th century marked the closest collaboration between the two, but this calm would soon end. Their life together was marred by betrayals and jealousies: d'Annunzio offered the leading role in *La Città Morta* (which he claimed to have written for Duse) to her prime rival, Sarah Bernhardt; he had a series of dalliances; and finally his manager had to stop Eleonora from burning down his house.

While Duse was best known for her tempestuous love affairs with men, she also had affairs with women. Her relationship with the dancer Isadora Duncan was thought to be sexual, for the actress spent several weeks with Isadora at Viareggio, a seaside resort in 1913, shortly after the dancer's two children drowned in a tragic accident. Duse was also known for mentoring many young actresses in her company, most notably Emma Grammatica, and she had lasting friendships with the singer Yvette Guilbert and the costume designer Jean-Philippe Worth.

or many years Eleonora was plagued by illness and periodically ordered by her doctors to retreat from the theatre. Although she retired from the stage in 1911, she resumed work in 1921. What followed was a series of engage-

ments in major European cities including London—but always accompanied by an oxygen tank. In 1923, Duse embarked on her final American tour. It was to cover 20 cities, after which she planned to retire to the Italian countryside. Although her health was visibly waning, Duse refused to halt the tour. On April 21, 1924, nearing the end of her tour, Duse performed in Pittsburgh at the Syrian Mosque. Though her performance was stunning, Duse nearly collapsed while taking her bows. She developed a fever that soon escalated and then lapsed into a coma on Good Friday. On Easter morning she asked to see her actors and the next day she died.

use's body lay in state for six days in Pittsburgh and was then brought to New York, where her hearse led a funeral procession directly to the pier of the ocean liner Duila, which returned her body to her beloved Italy. She was buried in the cemetery of St. Anne at Asolo.

Eleonora Duse died as she was born—in transit. Nevertheless, her acting left an indelible mark in the world of the theatre. She was noted for promoting subtlety and restraint on the stage and for avoiding the theatrical and artificial. She gained world wide fame and became, along with Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, one of the greatest actresses of her time.

This was a real play, and an actress who understood the author and was a greater artist than he.

—George Bernard Shaw. 2.

"Duse, Eleonora." *New Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1992.

Sheehy, Helen. *Eleonora Duse: a Biography*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Spitsberg, Tija. *Eleonora Duse*. www.glbtq.com/arts/duse/\_ e.html

- 1. Sheehy, p. 6.
- 2. Sheehy, p. 145.

## Other Characters in the Play

The two snakes are named after:

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) — a French poet who wrote his major poems between 1869 and 1874. His poem, *A Season in Hell*, (1873) was written when the young man lost faith in reality and was close to going insane. This torment resulted from his entanglement with another poet, Paul Verlaine.

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) — the author of impressionistic poetry inspired by music. In his travels through Great Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium, he described the landscape in dream imagery in *Romances without Words* (1874). His friendship with Rimbaud ended in 1874 when Verlaine shot and wounded his friend, an act for which he spent some time in prison.

Coquelin, Constant-Benoit — an actor in the *Comédie-Française* from 1860 to 1892 who later in life often appeared with Sarah Bernhardt. His signature role was as Cyrano in Edmond Rostand's play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. He later became a director at the *Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin*.

Ando, Flavio —a handsome Sicilian who became one of Duse's lovers and leading men. He left to form his own acting company in 1897, which infuriated Duse.

Worms, Gustave Hippolyte (1830-1910) — made his debut at the *Comédie-Française* in 1858, but left for Russia where he spent several successful years. He returned to the *Comédie-Française* in 1877 where he became Bernhardt's leading man in *Hernani*. He also appeared with her in *La Dame aux Camélias*.

Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

#### Alexandre Dumas Fils and his Inspiration for La Dame Aux Camélias

DUSE: You knew this Marguerite Gautier?

DUMAS: I—well, yes, in a way. Someone like her.

DUSE: But you said you had invented her.

DUMAS: Oh, it was a very long time ago.

I've only the vaguest of memories.

—The Ladies of the Camellias

a Dame aux Camélias arose from an episode in the early life of Alexandre Dumas fils. He ✓ rarely spoke of it in his later life for he became a very reserved man in contrast to his father. Dumas *père* wanted nothing better than to share all aspects of his life with an admiring public. Dressed in flowing cloaks, broad hats and fancy waistbands, he celebrated the success of The Three Musketeers, The Count of Monte Cristo and numerous novels and plays he'd written. As a youth, Dumas père had married Catherine Lebay, a poor seamstress. However, when his son was born, the father drifted away into the Parisian artistic world of letters. As he became more successful and more arrogant, he took on one mistress after another. Consequently, the young boy became very close to his mother. But this loving relationship was shattered in 1831 when Dumas père removed his son from his mother's care and placed him in boarding school.

he years that followed were sad and desolate for the young Dumas, but he began to appreciate school, the theatre and the brilliant figures of the Paris boulevards. In spring of 1842, Dumas *fils* caught a glimpse of a young woman with dark brown eyes and dark, heavy gleaming curls. Alphonsine Plessis had come to Paris as a poor orphan, but gradually her beauty and wit charmed the wealthy men of Paris and she became a leading courtesan. She then changed her name to Marie Duplessis and, at one time, shared her favors with seven aristocratic admirers.

Dumas *fils* finally met her at the Variety Theatre. Adorned with diamonds, Marie was with her wealthy Russian lover, Count de Stackelberg. The Count would leave Marie at her door for he valued his political reputation and his imagined place in history. Consequently, Dumas and a friend wan-

gled an invitation from an acquaintance of Marie's and soon found themselves in her apartment. At her candle-lit dining table, Dumas *fils* fell intensely in love. When Marie laughed so much she brought on a coughing spasm, she ran into her dressing room. Dumas followed. As in the play, he begged her to take care of herself and offered to look after her. He swore he would not live unless he could serve her and Marie gave him a camellia from her bouquet. He left her home as her accepted lover.

But Marie was quixotic. "Her own treachery, corruption and avidity for money were inescapable—and they ruled her life." 1. For some time, she had been extremely ill, but she turned to charlatans and psychics for help. But the young Dumas was always there to take care of her until August 1844. Marie had resumed her life of taking lovers, and the couple quarreled and parted. Dumas realized he could never afford Marie and wrote her a note saying: "Forgive me my only fault, that I am not a millionaire and let us forget we ever knew each other...." 2. He returned to his writing and Marie continued her *amours*. The story of their love, *La Dame aux Camélias*, opened on February 2, 1852. Marie died on February 3.

And the things one cannot print are just those that are the most curious of a man's life. That is why biographies, as a rule, signify nothing.

—Alexandre Dumas fils. 3.

Saunders, Edith. *The Prodigal Father.* London: Longman, Green and Co., 1951.

- 1. Saunders, p. 142.
- 2. Saunders, p. 3.
- 3. Saunders, p. xii.

## Theatre Direction in the Fin De Siécle

SARAH (ominously): Well—he's [Ivan]a <u>director</u> CYRANO (alarmed): What is that? ANDO: A chump that— WORMS: CHAP!

ANDO: —a chap that comes around and tells you where to stand.
—The Ladies of the Camellias

espite Sarah's and Coquelin's seeming lack of knowledge, directors have been around since the ancient Greek theatre when a director was called a "Didaskalos," an instructor. The early directors had a functional rather than a creative purpose; they conveyed to the actors, designers and technicians the "plan" for production that everyone already knew was correct or was the norm. More than any other artists, theatre directors until modern times have been extremely conservative.

During the latter part of the 19th century directing grew from an instructional process to a creative one. Changes in society, philosophy and the other arts offered a new avenue to the concept of the norm, as had been understood by the ancient Greeks. Scientific explanations led to a modern way of examining things and a new way of thinking. The impact of this kind of observation and cogitation was enormous, especially in the visual arts. It was evident in French impressionism (1874) where the artists demonstrated there were infinite ways of seeing a scene. Monet, Manet and Seurat, among others, painted with splashes and/or dots to portray the aspects of color and light. The visual arts have now progressed beyond impressionism until they have reached a point of total creativity and non-reliance on models or masters.

Theatre has moved in the direction of other arts, albeit more slowly. The prototypes of the modern director were the men and women who ran the 17th and 18th century playhouses of London and Europe. As actor/managers they had a common goal—to achieve a unified and correct scenic style. Their unifying motif was historical authenticity. During the 19th century men like Samuel Phelps and Charles Kean in England and Edwin Booth in the United States staged huge Shakespearean revivals which attempted to recreate

the accurate details of the time period of a Shakespeare play. However, they were actor/managers and their productions were star-oriented.

The first to pursue directing on its own was a German, George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. His contribution was "the concept of total integration of subordinate units."1. In his repertory company, the actors rotated between starring roles and bit parts; the scenery was designed to be used by the actors instead of as a backdrop. Stage movement became fluid, with individual "blocking" for each actor. These innovations of Saxe-Meiningen were followed by the ideals of naturalism of André Antoine in France (1887). Antoine's le théâtre libre was another step toward the realism advocated by Konstantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. In Germany, expressionism took a foothold and directors such as Fritz Erler tried to communicate the spiritual meaning of plays through a medium of color-changing screens instead of old stock scenery. In Switzerland, Adolphe Appia revolutionized directing with powerful theatrical effects of spotlights, shadows, dim-outs, blackouts and backlighting.

he 20th century became the era of the director: Max Reinhardt, Elia Kazan, Louis Jouvet, Bertold Brecht and Peter Brook, for example. The day of the anonymous director/stage manager has passed; directors now get equal billing with playwrights in the program. The director's goal at this time is to create a vivid, fresh and original theatrical experience.

Until discipline is understood in a theatre to be willing and reliant obedience to the director, no supreme achievement can be accomplished.

—Gordon Craig. On the Art of the Theatre. (NY: Theatre Arts Books,1925)

Cohen, Robert and Harrop, John. *Creative Play Direction*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974.

Staub, August W. Creating Theatre: the Art of Theatrical Directing. NY: Harper and Row, 1973.

1. Cohen and Harrop, p. 10.

#### The Fin De Siécle in France

Progress; and would you realize what Progress is, call it Tomorrow. —Victor Hugo, Les Misérables, Book I (1862).

The end of the 19th century in France was marked by political scandals, social unrest, dissension and decadence. Yet it was also an era of great scientific and social progress; an era that was witness to ideas and inventions that were of fundamental importance to the future. Among these were new ways of heating, lighting and getting about; better access to water, and the importance of leisure, exercise and information. The telegraph and telephone, typewriters, elevators, mass public transport, the bicycle, and electric lights were all accomplishments of the fin de siécle. Moreover, soaring modern productivity allowed the middle classes and the underprivileged to enjoy some of these advances. "Change became the nature of things and people believed that further improvement was not only possible but inevitable." 1.

Yet there was a darker side to the end of the 19th century. The material advances also produced a spiritual dejection characterized by a loss of enthusiasm, entropy, fatigue and boredom. A vast malaise had settled over the nation. Dr. George Miller Beard, an American, had published a paper on "Nervous Exhaustion"; when translated into French as "nerve weakness," housewives and young adults complained of listlessness, lack of energy and general weariness. The material advances of the century brought an insistence on a higher quality of life which competed with a kind of depression and deviance. No previous era had been free from vice, but, as the century ended, France led the world in the consumption of alcohol. The French medical profession also denounced the inordinate use of tobacco. In addition, drugs such as opium and morphine became common in fashionable circles while some experimented with hashish and strawberries soaked in

ether. "The apparent collapse of established ideals, the reaction against scientific materialism and rational explanations encouraged interest in mystery and the supernatural...." 2. If science could achieve as much as it had, then why not extend intelligence into telekinesis, ectoplasm, radioscopy, devil worship and other aspects of the occult? Some of this frustration was vented in the commission of crimes. There were more cases of homicide, arson, robberies, thefts and assault and battery than in the previous century. But there were growing attempts by men and women to promote compassionate social laws.

By 1883, France had become a Republic with a parade of presidents who played prominent roles in various scandals. For example, President Grévy (1888) was involved in the sale and purchases of honors and favors, while General Boulanger left Paris in 1889 (a few hours before the official opening of the Eiffel Tower) because of a thwarted love affair. Soon after the Boulanger departure came the collapse of the Panama Canal Company. This organization of deputies, senators and ministers devoured over 300 million dollars, the savings of thousands of small investors, and besmirched the fame of Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez canal, Gustave Eiffel and the prestige of the political class.

nother blow to the republic was the Dreyfus affair. In 1894, Captain Dreyfus of the Army General Staff had been arrested for passing information to the Germans. The Jewish officer from Alsace was tried and convicted for espionage and sentenced to life on Devil's Island. However, his family persisted in arguing that Dreyfus was innocent.

The French writer, Emile Zola, took up his cause and published a letter, "J'Accuse," in the newspaper of January 13, 1898, which prompted further investigations into the military and the government. The investigation revealed that the documents in question had been forged by a Major Henry of the General Staff and were intended to

prove Dreyfus guilty and remove him from his command. Major Henry committed suicide; Dreyfus was retried and finally given a presidential pardon.

The Dreyfus affair and the Panama Canal scandal left the population restless, anxious and uneasy with little respite from one crisis after another. The prevailing mood was that "the people longed for something that would sweep away a reigning society of corruption." 3. Thus, in 1891, a series of anarchist acts and riots began. In 1892, the homes of legal officials were bombed and in 1893, a bomb exploded in the Chamber of Deputies. These terrorists, usually acting alone, based their actions on a struggle against anyone or anything that hampered the individual's absolute freedom and independence. "Whatever else it was, the Belle Époque was a fine time for ferments, flare-ups, disorders, rampages, riots, turbulence, tumults, barricades and bloodshed." 4.

hough rationalism had been a force in the fin de siécle, France was still entranced with . Romance. Richard Wagner's operas were extremely popular, along with the works of Puccini, especially La Bohéme. Artists such as Whistler, Gauguin, Cézanne and Odilon Redon were accepted, but the Impressionists and Postimpressionists were criticized for ignoring inspirational messages in their cityscapes and/or scenes from private or leisure life. The posters of Toulouse-Lautrec flashed from walls and pavement columns, but Manet's "Olympia," labeled as filth by the Beaux Arts board, wound up in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Luxembourg until 1917 when Prime Minister Clémenceau had it transferred to the Louvre. He had to exert further influence to get it displayed. In the theatre, Edmond Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac was a return to the earlier Romantic traditions; this free-thinking philosopher/swordsman challenged authority and accepted ideas in the name of truth and free thought. The public also loved shows that offered it color, grandeur and elaborate ornaments such as the works performed by Sarah Bernhardt. Also popular were melodramas and cabarets. Before the century ended, Pierre de Coupertin was to use sports as a remedy against the industrial civilization that he disliked and feared. Sports and education could provide the antidote to social evils and speedy human progress; by converting the young to games, exercise and self-discipline, healthy minds could flourish in healthy bodies. And so was born the modern day Olympics.

The 19th century closed with the Paris Exhibition of 1900 which celebrated the scientific and technological progress of the century. Its emphasis was on personal ambition that would focus on success through the peaceful arts of science and industry.

owever, those who remember the past might echo the words of an old lady who recalled her life at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "I have been a frivolous woman. I have lived in frivolous times. Frivolous nations are happy nations." 5.

Hutton, John G. *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science and Anarchism in Fin de Siecle France.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994.

Weber, Eugen. *France: Fin de Siecle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

- 1. Weber, p. 4.
- 2. Weber, p. 32.
- 3. Hutton, p. 53.
- 4. Weber, p. 128.
- 5. Weber, p. 244.

### The Curse of "The Scottish Play"

"Macbeth is an unholy riddle we still hesitate to name for the fear of retribution." Michael Pennington, British actor and author

In the play the actors are in a near state of panic when someone almost mentions the name of "Macbeth". *Macbeth* is to the theatrical world what King Tut's tomb is to archaeologists. No other play has had more bad luck associated with it: coronaries, auto accidents, mysterious maladies, botched lines and sword wounds. This theatrical superstition is not taken lightly: even to pronounce the play's title is considered poor dressing room form. Its very name is a curse and actors will use any euphemism rather than actually say the "M" word. For hundreds of years it's been delicately referred to as "The Scottish Play" or simply "*That* play".

The superstition originated with unpleasant events that seemed to occur whenever the play was performed. For example, during the play's very first performance on August 7, 1606, Hal Berridge, the young boy playing Lady Macbeth, died backstage. In 1849, after years of intense animosity, the rivalry between the American actor Edwin Forrest and the British actor John Macready culminated in a riot in which thirty one people were killed. It took place in front of the theatre where Macready was starring in *Macbeth*.

The superstition continued into the 20th century. In 1934 at the Old Vic, the play went through four different Macbeths. Michael Kim came down with laryngitis; Alastair Sim caught a chill, and Marius Goring was fired. John Laurie survived to finish the run. The 1937 Laurence Olivier-Judith Anderson production at the Old Vic must have been the unluckiest ever. Just before the scheduled opening night Lilian

Baylis (the founder of the Old Vic) lost her favorite dog, Snoo. The next day Miss Bayliss died after learning opening night was to be postponed. According to Olivier's biographer, Donald Spoto, the director, "barely escaped death in a taxi accident; Olivier was nearly brained by a falling stage sandbag; the scenery did not fit the stage, and composer Darius Milhaud was not happy with his musical score and kept tearing up pages of his composition." 1.

In addition, Olivier, with characteristic gusto, accidentally wounded the various Macduffs in the final battle scene. In 1938 the Stratford Festival opened with a production of *Macbeth*. During its run an old man had both his legs broken when he was hit by his own car in the parking lot; Lady Macbeth ran her car into a store window, and Macduff fell off his horse and had to be replaced by an understudy.

ven critics are not immune. After the first ight's performance of John Houseman and **⊿**Orson Welles all-black production of Voodoo Macbeth, Percy Hammond, the drama critic of the New York Herald Tribune, wrote a scathing review, criticizing the government's endowment of the arts and calling the production "an exhibition of deluxe boondoggling." 2. Shortly after the review appeared, a group of African drummers in the play approached Houseman and asked if the critic was a bad man. Houseman concurred: "A bad man." Later that night the basement of the theatre was filled with the sounds of drumming and weird chanting. When the house manager informed Welles and Houseman of this event the next day, they looked at each other uncomfortably. That afternoon Percy Hammond, the Herald Tribune reported, had been taken ill-----and a few days later he died-----of pneumonia, it was said.

Epstein, Norrie. *The Friendly Shakespeare*. NY: Penguin Books, 1993.

- 1. Epstein, p. 429.
- 2. Epstein, p. 430.

## Activities

- 1. Many of the characters in *The Ladies of the Camellia* had real-life counterparts, none more notable than Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Dusa. Research their lives and their acting styles. What happened to them?
- 2. Bernhardt and Duse were the superstars of their day. Talented and eccentric, (Bernhardt slept in a coffin) they were legends before television and mass media existed. Compare them to "stars" of today.
- 3. Anarchism plays a part in *The Ladies of the Camellias*. Research this political ideology and its followers.
- 4. The play within *The Ladies of the Camellias* is adapted from a novel by Alexandre Dumas *fils La Dame aux Camelias*. In French, *fils* follows the surname to distinguish a son from his father. Research the famous father and son.

Familiarize yourself with the story by reading through the play synopsis at the beginning of the Study Guide.

- 5. Write down your initial response to the story, which you can reflect back on, after you have seen the play.
- 6. Think about the title of the Play, *The Ladies of the Camellias*. Divide into small groups and discuss different meanings and contexts for the title of the play.

- 7. Research the lives of Sarah Bearnheardt and Eledorso Duse. What did you learn about the characteristics of the individuals. What interested you most about each of them? Discuss the different styles of both lifestyles and professionalism.
- 8. In small groups decide which two scenes of the play were the most powerful. See if you can pinpoint whether this can be attributed to the actor's performance, to the playwright's words, or to the staging of the scene.
- 9. How did the set help convey the tone of the narrative? How did it support the central action and themes of the play?
- 10. What did you think about the actors' interpretations and portrayal of their characters? Were the relationships between the characters believable?
- 11. Write a review of the play. This could be based on your own experience and reaction to the performance or on the reactions of your classmates. Consider commenting on some of the following aspects of the production:
- the sets, costumes and lighting
- the effectiveness of the performers
- any highlight for you and other audience members

#### Colorado Model Content Standards; Reading & Writing

- 1. Students read and understand a variety of materials.
- 2. Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.
- 3. Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
- 4. Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.
- 5. Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media and reference sources.
- 6. Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.