

## Reynaldo Hahn, *La Grande Sarah* (1930)

Comprising journal excerpts adapted for publication, Reynaldo Hahn's memories of Sarah Bernhardt were first published in *Les Annales politiques et littéraires* in four series between 15 October and 1 December 1928, embellished with drawings by Jean Oberlé. In 1930, they were published together by Hachette (Paris) in a volume titled *La Grande Sarah: souvenirs* (192 pages), then in 1932 by Elkin Mathews & Marrot (London) in an English translation by Ethel Thompson, titled [\*Sarah Bernhardt: impressions by R. Hahn\*](#). This English edition, containing several photographs, is the only one to indicate years at the top of certain chapters (although these are not always reliable). According to their content and certain other chronological indicators, the volume's seven sections may be situated roughly between 1898 and 1904.

Hahn met Sarah Bernhardt for the first time in late 1896, but, as he recalls in his preface, her name is associated with his "earliest memories", since "I was six or seven years old" the first time his parents "took me to see her act". Having quickly become a "much loved friend", as the actress addressed him—the nature of their friendship unambiguous due to Hahn's homosexuality—he became part of the inner circle that gathered around her (alongside Jules Lemaitre, Edmond Rostand, Louise Abbéma, and Georges Clairin). Given his lifelong passion for theater, Hahn also became a constant member of Bernhardt's public, attentive to her nonstop activity and taking note of the "varied aspects of that prodigious and peerless personality" (p. 1).

His revised notes contain his impressions of Sarah Bernhardt on stage, whether in her Parisian theater or on tour in London and Brussels. He analyzes the subtlest nuances and changes to her acting from one performance to another, such as in response to her appearance in Dumas fils's *La Dame aux camélias* on Friday 13 May 1898—"a marvel of execution"—to which she gives "life, life in all its most elusive aspects—the most difficult to represent by any artistic means, whatever they may be—normal everyday feelings, all the daily fret of life" (p. 1). In London, appearing in *Phèdre*, "she is not in the mood" up through the third act, but becomes "sublime" in the fourth, before a public "moved by such strength, such passion, such tempestuous rendings"; then, in the fifth, she resembles "a living corpse", giving the "impression of a human being given over utterly to pain" (p. 47-48). The actress is also depicted in her roles in Scribe and Legouvé's *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, and Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca*.

Hahn also observes the star backstage, depicting her with a natural fantasy and liberty: in her green room, onboard trains or boats; at her home, while she is sculpting, expressing her opinions of other actors, or receiving close friends over lunch when Coquelin arrives, "aged [...] eyeglasses on his prominent nose" (p. 72). A frequent guest to her property in Belle-Île-en-Mer, off the coast of the Quiberon

Peninsula (Bretagne), Hahn, curious and charmed, watches Bernhardt taking “a sun bath on the roof in a kimono and Panama hat, a scarf round her neck” (p. 84), playing tennis, visiting her farm, or trying to take a nap in the “Sarahtorium”, “a sunfilled spot where Sarah has had dwarf tamarisks about four feet high planted, among which are placed garden tables and long chairs” (p. 82).

Philippe BLAY

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Trans. Peter Asimov

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