

Sarah Bernhardt and the Bishops of Montreal and Quebec

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Sarah Bernhardt, frequently referred to as the “Divine Sarah” because of the unusual qualities of her “golden voice,” made a unique contribution to the stage during a career spanning fifty-six years (1866-1922). Her death in 1923 made newspaper headlines throughout the Western world; column after column recalled highlights of her travels to several continents and inevitably praised her unstinting courage during the last painful years of her life as she struggled on despite the amputation of a leg in 1915, at age 71.

Sarah’s visits to North America are reasonably well known, thanks to numerous biographies and studies of the French actress.¹ Between 1880 and 1917, she made nine visits ranging in length from six months to a year and a half, crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific and back again. Her visits to Canada, however, are by-and-large unknown, primarily because the pertinent information has been unavailable. Bernhardt fans will know of her controversial visit to Montreal in 1880, an event described twenty-six years later in her memoirs and which has served as source material for unwary biographers and academics who have not only accepted Sarah’s version of events literally, but have even distorted certain of her statements and thus embellished and enriched the Bernhardt legend. The great French actress visited various Canadian cities during eight of her nine visits and played in Montreal nine different times. Theatrically, Bernhardt’s dramatic presentations in French Canada are very important because, performing as she did in French, she was understood by Montrealers and, more importantly, by the city’s drama critics. In this brief study, I would like to consider Bernhardt’s Quebec visits primarily from the point of view of morality and clerical intervention and then to assess episcopal criticism in the light of French Canadian history and the changing attitudes of the

¹ Madame Bernhardt published her memoirs in 1907 (*Ma Double Vie: Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt*, Paris: Charpent et Fasquille). An English version, *Memories of My Life*, was reprinted in 1968 by Benjamin Blom (New York). An English translation of Louis Verneuil’s biography, *The Fabulous Life of Sarah Bernhardt*, offers much detail (New York: Harper Brothers, 1942). Another excellent title is Cornelia-Otis Skinner’s *Madame Sarah* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967). References by these authors to Bernhardt’s Montreal visit of 1880 are incomplete and based on Bernhardt’s own recollections.

public to the stage in the years preceding World War I.²

Bernhardt's first visit to Canada took place in the freezing cold winter of 1880 when she travelled by train from New York to Montreal. At St. Alban's, Vermont, she was met by a Montreal delegation consisting of prominent individuals such as Joseph Doutre, Senator Thibaudeau, Henry Thomas, Manager of the Academy of Music, and representatives of the French and English press who had arrived at this border town, courtesy of the Central Vermont Railway which provided a special car for the occasion. Bernhardt's manager, Mr. Abbey, was introduced to the Montreal delegation by Mr. Thomas, who escorted them to Bernhardt's car, "The City of Worcester," where, despite her fatigue, Bernhardt met each member of the deputation. When the formal introductions were completed, the Quebec poet, Louis Fréchette, then stepped forward and began to read a poem entitled "A Sarah Bernhardt," which begins with these lines:

Salut, Sarah! Salut,
Charmante Dona Sol!³

With warm emotion, Fréchette suggests the excitement and pride that French Canadians felt on the arrival of this valiant woman, the radiant artist, the admirable painter and sovereign sculptor who personified, indeed, universal genius.

Two and one-half hours later, Bernhardt and her troupe arrived at Bonaventure station in the heart of Montreal on December 23, 1880. Here she was greeted by a large crowd (1,000 to 2,000 people, according to *The Montreal Star*; 5,000 to 6,000, according to *La Patrie* and, according to Bernhardt herself in her *Mémoires*, at least 10,000 people). The City Band, under the direction of Mr. Ernest Lavigne and Major Hughes of the 65th Regiment played "La Marseillaise" and Madame Bernhardt was welcomed by cries of "Vive Sarah Bernhardt! Vive La France!" Sarah was then presented with a bouquet of flowers by Madame Joseph Doutre, welcomed officially to the City and proceeded by sleigh to the spanking new Windsor Hotel where, by the next morning according to *The Montreal Star*, the French Tricolor flew in honor of her presence.

The enthusiastic descriptions of Bernhardt's first arrival in Montreal were

² The present article is an expanded version of the paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association in May, 1985. I am most grateful to the Executive for enabling me to develop this portion of my research on Bernhardt's visits to Canada.

³ Prior to her 1880 tour of North America, Bernhardt had received critical acclaim for her interpretation of Dona Sol, the lead role in Victor Hugo's *Hernani*: Fréchette welcomes the diva in his poem with the words:

Hail, Sarah! Hail, Charming Dona Sol!

accompanied by a letter to the editor of *La Minerve* from the Bishop of Montreal.⁴ In the letter Bishop Fabre expresses his reservations concerning the program to be presented in the next few days and points out that all good Catholics should realize it is their duty, their urgent duty, to refrain from watching these theatrical presentations.

Despite the Bishop's interdiction, French and English Canadian alike flocked to see the opening performance of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*. As *La Patrie* points out,

all those who love and cultivate the arts and letters came together to applaud the great artist who is at the same time a fine individual and a noble French woman.⁵

Among the notables present were His Honour the Mayor, Provincial Ministers of Parliament, Members of the Law courts, the press, and "women in beautiful dresses." Indeed,

Both English and French speaking Montreal were there in all their splendour.⁶

In her memoirs, Sarah reminisces about her first visit to Canada. Recalling a man arrested by police as he tried to hand her a bouquet, Bernhardt, to her horror, discovered that he was to be hung a few months later. "This incident," writes Bernhardt, "left me somewhat sad. The anger of the Bishop of Montreal was necessary to help me regain my good humour."⁷

Graphically, Sarah describes his reactions:

That prelate, after holding forth in the pulpit against the immorality of French literature, forbade his flock to go to the theatre. He spoke violently and spitefully against modern France. As to Scribe's play (*Adrienne Lecouvreur*), he tore it into shreds, as it were, declaiming against the immoral love of the comédienne and of the hero and against the adulterous love of the Princesse de Bouillon.⁸

Dramatically, Bernhardt continues:

⁴ Monseigneur Fabre's letter was reprinted in the French press. See *La Patrie*, December 23, 1880, p. 3.

⁵ *La Patrie*, December 24, 1880, p. 2 (my translation).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Sarah Bernhardt, *Memories of My Life*, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968, p. 393.

⁸ *Ibid.*

But the truth showed itself in spite of all, and he cried out, with fury intensified by outrage: "In this infamous lucubration of French authors there is a court abbé, who, thanks to the unbounded licentiousness of his expressions, constitutes a direct insult to the clergy."⁹

She then concludes on a note of calm satisfaction:

Finally he pronounced an anathema against Scribe, who was already dead, against Legouvé, against me, and against all my company. The result was that crowds came from everywhere, and the four performances, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Froufrou*, *La Dame aux Camélias* (Matinée), and *Hernani* had a colossal success and brought in fabulous receipts.¹⁰

Otis Skinner's version of events resemble those of Bernhardt's, though exaggeration and a vivid imagination characterize this portion of her informative biography:

The Montreal engagement was a huge success due partly to some excellent publicity furnished by the Catholic archbishop who for several weeks had fulminated from his pulpit against the arrival in their pious city of this theatrical whore of Babylon. Time and again he had forbidden his flock to attend any of her performances and, of course, the flock couldn't wait to attend every one of them. The particular play over which as a contaminating influence the holy man seems most to have worked himself up was Scribe and Legouvé's *Adrienne Lecouvreur*.¹¹

Skinner then summarizes the controversial play objectively and notes the prelate's reactions with an inaccuracy:

[Its] plot deals with the fatal rivalry between the actress Adrienne, an admitted courtesan, and the Duchesse de Bouillon, a woman of shameless morals, each of them the mistress of Marshal de Saxe -- a subject he considered to be so evil, the archbishop recommended the immediate excommunication of both Sarah Bernhardt and Eugene Scribe. (Legouvé, the second co-author, seems to have been let off the indictment.) As Scribe had already been dead some twenty years, to excommunicate him would have offered complications.¹²

In my attempt to sift fact from fiction, I have confirmed some, but not all of the episodes and attitudes cited and have discovered, some new information.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ C. O. Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, pp. 177-178.

¹² *Ibid.*

According to the *New York Times*, the “curé” of Notre-Dame forbade his parishioners to attend *Adrienne Lecouvreur* during his Sunday sermon of December 12, 1880. (I have been unable to confirm this in the French press of Montreal or to obtain a printed text of the sermon.) Subject to confirmation, it seems that the said parish priest was probably not Bishop Fabre, although it could have been the prelate and not the parish priest who gave the Sunday sermon if Notre-Dame was considered in 1880 the Cathedral parish.¹³ In any case, Fabre subsequently wrote to the editor of *La Minerve*, asking him to print a letter to the faithful as well as a “critique” of the Scribe-Legouvé play, prepared for the Bishop. In the December 23 edition of this Montreal paper Fabre points out that it was the firm duty of all good Catholics to refrain from attending that week’s theatre offerings for two reasons: first of all, they would take place during Advent and on Christmas Day;¹⁴ secondly, the attitudes (“la morale”) expressed therein represented a grave danger for public mores.¹⁵

As for the review of the play (written, no doubt, by a priest of the diocese), it notes the presence on stage of two adulterous “liaisons” with dialogues and allusions tending to excuse the conduct of both prince and princess. Furthermore, the play is called immoral in its plot, in the statements expressed by the actors and in various “risqué” situations. These were sad lessons for Christian families, continues the writer; the talents of those passing on these lessons could only increase and make more attractive and excusable the evil passions that swirl unceasingly in the depths of the human heart.

There is no question, then, that Bernhardt’s first visit to Montreal was an unwelcome event for the Bishop of Montreal, who did, indeed, urge the faithful not to attend her performances. However, despite Skinner’s suggestion, he did *not* “fulminate from the pulpit” for several weeks prior to Sarah’s arrival. He may have forbidden attendance at *Adrienne Lecouvreur* in the December 12 sermon; if not, he certainly approved the sentiments expressed by the cleric in question. There may well have been similar remarks from other pulpits in the diocese, though I have not yet found references to them. Fabre in effect reacted

¹³ Apparently Notre-Dame Church in the nineteenth century was considered a parish church. The present cathedral, Marie Reine du Monde, was built by Archbishop Bruchési; it opened in 1894 and was known as St. James’ Cathedral until the 1950s.

¹⁴ Although Bernhardt is not mentioned and there is no specific allusion to *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, the Bishop’s references were clearly understood by Montrealers. Bernhardt presented *Adrienne Lecouvreur* the evening of December 23; *Frou-Frou* on December 24; *La Dame aux Camélias* (matinee) and *Hernani* (evening) on December 25.

¹⁵ *La Minerve*, December 23, 1880, p. 2. In Appendix I, I have included a translation of Fabre’s letter.

negatively to Bernhardt, as did many Protestant clerics in New York and other American cities. But whereas some of these referred to the personal “immorality” of Sarah (the mother of an illegitimate child), Fabre, by his reasoned analysis of *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and his vigorous condemnation, unwittingly gained widespread publicity and editorial comment in the secular and religious press of North America and even in Paris. What he did not do, however, was to recommend, as Skinner suggests, the immediate excommunication of Sarah and Scribe, so-called “facts” which have become a permanent part of the colorful Bernhardt mythology.

During my retracing of events in December, 1880, I came across one delightful incident that puts Bishop Fabre’s public remarks into an interesting perspective. Bernhardt’s manager had booked evening and matinee performances at the Academy of Music from December 23 to 25. Ticket sales and public enthusiasm were phenomenal, although the Christmas Day performances were poorly attended. (Organizers seemed quite unaware of the family and religious importance of Christmas in the French Canadian community.) This aspect obviously annoyed Bishop Fabre, who asked City Council to close the Academy of Music on December 25 on the basis of a violation of the Sunday Laws. On December 21, City Council, at the urging of the Mayor, hastily and heartily approved a motion to cancel the matinee and evening performances on Christmas Day. Following normal procedure, the City Attorney was duly consulted and reported back that no statute or amendment allowed the City to pass such a motion. (Apparently, the legislation pertaining to Sunday amusements did not include religious holidays if they occurred on a weekday, which was the case in 1880.) What was the net result of this legal interpretation? On December 23 a Montreal delegation met the controversial artist in St. Alban’s. There followed a rousing welcome by crowds waiting in the freezing cold, and after the first performance of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, the unharnessing of horses and the pulling of Sarah’s sled by lawyers, doctors and students to the new and elegant Windsor Hotel. As for the city councillors’ voting to close the Academy of Music, the *New York Times* suggests they took their tickets for Bernhardt out of their pockets with relief on receipt of the Attorney’s report.

In 1891 Bernhardt returned to Canada, visiting Montreal in April, Vancouver in September, Toronto in October and Montreal again at the end of December. Arriving from New York and Boston, on the morning of April 6, Bernhardt was met by what the *Montreal Star* describes in a curious turn of phrase as “a crowd of 800 or two people.”¹⁶ The same writer notes that Bernhardt

had a light veil drawn over her classical features, to shield them from the gaze of the

¹⁶ *Montreal Daily Star*, April 7, 1891, p. 6.

gaping crowd, who probably had not purchased reserved seat tickets.¹⁷

The audience at Bernhardt's first production of the season, *Fédora*, was

large and fashionable, and the interest displayed to again witness the 'divine Sarah' after a lapse of ten years, was intense.¹⁸

A crowded house was present for *Jeanne d'Arc*, which apparently was being played in America for the first time. Tears and thunderous applause greeted Bernhardt's rendition of *The Maid of Orleans*, a role that had been made to order, according to *La Presse*, for the many young girls who were present at the performance. The same writer proceeded to reassure the general public that

Jeanne d'Arc is indeed a lyrical drama which is irreproachable in all aspects and parents may indeed bring their children without fearing in the least any regret whatsoever.¹⁹

In her subsequent performances of *La Tosca* and *La Dame aux Camélias*, Bernhardt's reception was equally warm and enthusiastic, attracting full houses and, as one columnist notes, in all parts of the orchestra and balconies,

there were to be seen ministers from Ottawa and Quebec City and businessmen, writers of literature, artists and a great number of the richest and most elegant women of Montreal society.²⁰

Students of the Montreal campus of Laval University were not to be outdone in their reception of "La Divine Sarah," for on the morning of April 8, they held a general assembly, at which they decided to attend the performance of *Camille* and offer a crown of flowers to the world-famous tragedienne.²¹ Their presence is aptly described by the critic of the *Montreal Daily Star*:

One finishing word of praise duly deserved to the usual noisy portion of the audience – the patrons of the upper gallery. They had the good taste to present the diva with beautiful flowers, which were thankfully and appropriately received as the expression of the admiration of the struggling youth of our population. Several good numbers of part songs with mandolin accompaniments were well rendered and even greeted with applause by the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Montreal Daily Star*, April 8, 1891, p. 1.

¹⁹ *La Presse*, April 8, 1891, last page.

²⁰ *La Presse*, April 10, 1891, last page.

²¹ *La Minerve*, April 9, 1891, p. 3.

people in the lower part of the house.²²

The extraordinarily warm reception of Bernhardt during her 1891 visit derived in part from the support of the editorialists of *La Presse*, who, prior to Bernhardt's presentation of *La Tosca*, had suggested that the crucifix placed on the breast of Baron De Scarpia be replaced by a simple cross of black wood. Obviously Sarah, for once, had given in to public opinion; both she and her management were thanked for having taken note of the religious sentiments of French Canadian spectators.²³

Leaving Montreal, Bernhardt crossed the United States and Australia in a triumphant tour. On her way back to New York City and France, she returned briefly to Montreal in December. Mindful, no doubt, of the warm reception extended the previous April, she was not disappointed, for, according to one French paper, she "obtained the greatest triumph she has ever had in Montreal."²⁴ No episcopal comment was forthcoming, but reservations expressed by the conservative *La Minerve* regret the unfortunate absence of the "moralizing note ... so typical of modern plays"²⁵ as well as the inclusion of Sardou's *La Tosca*, whose indelicate content does not respect "the feelings of our people."²⁶

In 1896, a packed house welcomed Sarah in the Academy of Music. According to the *Star*, her popularity had not diminished:

It is 16 years since the greatest of the French tragediennes of the present day first visited this City and the hold she secured on Montrealers is as tenacious today and, in fact, has been strengthened by the visit which she paid to Montreal four years ago.²⁷

La Minerve recognizes Sarah's dramatic talents and her golden voice but expresses once again, reservations about moral considerations, *Izeyl* introducing an Oriental fatalism incompatible with Christianity²⁸ and *Gismonda* lacking

²² *Montreal Daily Star*, April 11, 1891, p. 8. This intervention in the dramatic presentation recalls the general custom of Montreal spectators of singing before the beginning of a play and during the intermissions. For example, M. E. Laberge sang popular songs at appropriate times during the *Jeanne d'Arc* program. cf. *La Patrie*, April 11, 1891, last page.

²³ *La Presse*, April 11, 1891, last page.

²⁴ *La Presse*, December 30, 1891, last page.

²⁵ *La Minerve*, December 30, 1891, p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Montreal Daily Star*, February 27, 1896, p. 7. Bernhardt visited Montreal twice in 1891 (April 6-11 and December 29-31, and January 1-2, 1892).

²⁸ *La Minerve*, February 27, 1896, p. 4.

“orthodox inspiration.”²⁹ This paper echoes the sentiments of Montreal’s Archbishop, whose public criticism obviously did little to dampen enthusiasm for the 1896 visit of Bernhardt.³⁰ The Laval University students ignored these strictures and turned out to acclaim “la divine” in what is described as “a demonstration to honour genius and art.”³¹ Organized as usual by Sarah’s admiring poet, Fréchette, some 500 presented a ‘reprise’ of their 1891 ovation. Obviously aware of their intentions, Sarah appeared at the beginning of Act 2 of *La Dame aux Camélias* decked in University colours, and elicited immediate applause. The great tragedienne then listened to a cantata dedicated to her by Fréchette and received from the student singers huge baskets of flowers.

Bernhardt’s most memorable and spectacular Canadian visit was her 1905 stay in Montreal and Quebec. Episcopal and public censure prior to her arrival, coupled with angry and explosive response by Sarah after her arrival, caused journalistic waves from coast to coast, which rippled into British and French newspapers. Bernhardt was booked at the Théâtre Français from November 27 to December 2. Her repertory consisted of eight different plays, including the popular stand-by *La Dame aux Camélias* (known in North America as *Camille*) and the more controversial (for Montreal) *Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

Prior to Bernhardt’s arrival, Archbishop Bruchési, successor to Fabre, formally asked all Catholic newspapers in his diocese to refuse theatre ads, a request ignored by many according to Jules-Paul Tardivel, the editor of the ultramontane *La Vérité*.³² On Sunday, November 26, the day prior to Sarah’s arrival, the Archbishop read from the pulpit a circular letter to the faithful that was published in the French press along with an English version in the *Star* and the *Gazette*. Deploring the fact that theatres for several years “have invaded our city,” Bruchési refers to the stage as a “danger to morality and, for young people, a veritable schooling in sin.” If intemperance is our enemy, he continues, so then is the theatre an enemy,

an enemy of healthy morality which it attacks and weakens, the enemy of our Christian doctrines and traditions which it frequently contradicts, the enemy of principles which make families happy and honest, and this through scenes of passion and criminal love which it constantly presents to the spectator.³³

²⁹ *La Minerve*, February 29, 1896, p. 1.

³⁰ *Mandements ... de Montréal*, vol. 12, p. 182.

³¹ *La Patrie*, March 2, 1896, p. 4.

³² *La Vérité*, November 25, 1905, p. 159. The term “Catholic newspapers” as used by Bruchési would include the two major French language papers of Montreal, *La Presse* and *La Patrie*.

³³ *La Patrie*, November 27, 1905, p. 5. The translations into English are my own. A full text of the English version of Bruchési’s letter is found in Appendix II.

Bruchési then complains that almost all the plays in the French repertory were then staged without fear or scruple. Indeed, a mere few months ago, an actress “whose name we would not wish to pronounce” presented disgraceful scenes for which she was noted. (The reference here is to the well-known French actress, Rachell, who passed through Montreal the preceeding January.) The Montreal prelate vigorously expresses his distaste for the continental French literary heritage:

In our Catholic city we have no need of that literature, of those plays imported from a world where Christian marriage is mocked, where morality and shame have become mere words.

Finally, Bruchési, without naming Bernhardt, refers in general terms to “one theatre in particular,” asking the faithful to refrain from attending “an occasion of sin.”

Arriving at 5:30 a.m. on the morning of the twenty-seventh, after a 40-hour train trip from Chicago, Bernhardt played *La Sorcière* that evening to crowded houses. Local newspaper accounts vary in tone and enthusiasm. Quebec City’s *Le Soleil* announces the “colossal success of Sardou’s play, with an audience of 3500 people.” *La Presse*, exercising its solemn duty, protests against a play which depicts the Cardinal and religious committing perjury and making false denunciations. It also berates Sara’s troupe:

The great error of French actors is to mistake Canada for France and not to make any distinction between milieux that are so different.³⁴

In the same article, the critic acknowledges Sarah’s genius in a few words, admits that the theatre was absolutely packed and then refuses to name prominent people present “out of respect for the views so clearly expressed by the Archbishop on Sunday last.” *The Gazette* describes at great length the crowds that thronged to the Théâtre Français, praises the acting of the great Sarah “who is even more powerful than the one of years ago” and notes that *La Sorcière* attracted “the greatest audience which ever saw a theatrical presentation in Montreal.”³⁵ The same paper reproduced the next day a paragraph from *La Patrie* which criticizes the public for clapping at Sardou’s tirades against the Church and lists the names of six Popes who condemned the Inquisition. *The Gazette* snidely notes that *La Patrie* had dismissed Bernhardt’s interpretation of *La Sorcière* in a mere 60 lines and so would soon publish a complete account of the Inquisition “for the enlightenment of its readers.”³⁶

³⁴ *La Presse*, November 28, 1905, p. 12.

³⁵ *Montreal Gazette*, November 28, 1905, p. 11.

³⁶ *Montreal Gazette*, November 29, 1905, p. 7.

Given the religious tensions of the time, one might be tempted to suspect that those clapping to approve the young Moorish woman's criticism of the Inquisition might have been Anglophone Protestants, but this is neither clear nor self-evident. Indeed, the English press displayed an unusual openness of mind with respect to the interpretation given in the play. The *Star's* critic, for example, recognizes the necessity of judging the religious intolerance displayed during the performance of *La Sorcière* in the context of its time while *The Gazette*, expressing similar sentiments, prefers to praise Bernhardt's contribution to the art of acting.³⁷

With less discretion, however, the editorialist of the French language Protestant paper, *L'Aurore*, observes provocatively that despite the Archbishop's letter, the Théâtre Français was packed to the rafters particularly by French Canadians, who, one might presume, were at least nominal Catholics.³⁸ He then proceeds to attack the judgements of the young prelate, stating that it was the Roman Church itself that was greatly responsible for the breakdown of the theatre in France and gives by way of proof a list of examples.

A full house watched Sarah perform in *La Dame aux Camélias* on November 28. The next day, Sarah, in Victor Hugo's melodrama *Angelo* "died" on stage in a new and original way and, in *Tosca*, the 61-year-old woman became magically a mere young girl in the throes of madness. At the matinee of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, in an adaptation by Bernhardt herself of the Scribe-Legouvé version, a large crowd included many women.³⁹ On the Friday evening, the Governor-General and Lady Grey were visibly impressed by the talents of the tragic *Fédora*; on the Saturday evening, Madame Bernhardt closed a heavy program with a moving rendition of Racine's *Phèdre*, a classical inspiration. With an average attendance of 2550 people at each of nine performances, Bernhardt's triumphant week in Montreal, according to the manager of the Sparrow Theatre, Mr. W. A. Edwards, marked the greatest financial success in the history of the Montreal theatre.⁴⁰

On the afternoon of Sunday, December 3, Sarah arrived in Quebec City, to discover that "le mauvais théâtre" had been criticized vigorously in Upper and Lower Town, in the Basilica by M. Faguy and in St. Roch's parish church by Antoine Gauvreau, as well as in all other pulpits of Quebec City and Levis.⁴¹ On the Monday evening (December 4), she played *La Dame aux Camélias* with great success which, according to *Le Soleil*,

³⁷ *Montreal Star*, November 28, 1905, p. 11. *Montreal Gazette*, November 28, 1905, p. 4.

³⁸ *L'Aurore*, December 8, 1905, p. 3.

³⁹ *Montreal Star*, November 30, 1905, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *La Patrie*, December 4, 1905, p. 7.

⁴¹ *L'Événement*, December 4, 1905, p. 3.

contained nothing worse than those famous reports from the Courts of Law which are published with pictures and illustrations in Montreal newspapers.⁴²

Le Canada provocatively lists the names of eminent Francophones seen attending *La Sorcière* the previous week in Montreal. This elicited a prompt and angry response from Archbishop Bruchési in the form of a second and lengthier pastoral letter which was read in all Montreal churches on the morning of Bernhardt's departure for Quebec City and published in the ancient capital the following Tuesday (December 5).⁴³ Praising the faithful who listened to his first appeal and sacrificed the tickets they had already purchased, Bruchési reproaches those who disobeyed and dismisses their reasons for attending. He then becomes more specific:

We challenge the most brilliant orator and the most famous of actresses to come here into our city, to mock our history or insult the honour of the French Canadian name.⁴⁴

In this case, continues the prelate, it is not merely our country that is being attacked, it is the Church itself. He then reproaches an unnamed French newspaper (*Le Canada*) for publishing a long list of those seen attending the theatre, for, on inquiry, many of those listed stated categorically they had not been present. In a dramatic climax, the Bishop points out that not only were reputations tarnished, but also episcopal authority. He then reminds theatre directors that the Criminal Code could be invoked, and warns that if things did not change, he would have recourse to moral measures more effective, perhaps, than the laws of the State.

Tuesday, December 5, marked perhaps the most tempestuous day in Canadian theatrical history, not so much because of the diva's interpretation of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, which was glossed over in the ensuing confusion, but rather because of her famous interview at the Château Frontenac and her rather hasty (and hastened) departure from Old Quebec. *L'Événement* reported, ostensibly verbatim, Sarah's conversation with Ulric Barthe, a spokesman for the numerous reporters interviewing Sarah. Expressing her pleasure with Canada, she is reputed to have then said the following:

But I understand nothing of your population. You have English Canadians, Irish Canadians, French Canadians, Iroquois Canadians! But can you tell me

⁴² *Le Soleil*, December 5, 1905, p. 10.

⁴³ *L'Événement*, December 5, 1905, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* These translations into English are my own. The complete text of the letter is found in Appendix III.

why you are called French Canadians? ... You have hardly a drop of French blood in your veins.⁴⁵

With a little prompting, Sarah further opines that, despite the beauty of this country, only agriculture had prospered since she first visited Canada 25 years ago – “it has no painters, writers, sculptors, poets – except Fréchette perhaps.” As for progress, she continues: “You have progressed in 25 years but ... backwards” and then, fatally, in response to a question about ecclesiastical authority, she is quoted:

Ah, yes, I understand, here you are still under the yoke of the clergy.

Le Soleil refused to publish this “conversation,” while *The Montreal Gazette* published Mr. Barthe’s version of the so-called interview.⁴⁶ The Secretary of the Auditorium Theatre (Barthe), stressed certain facts: the cordiality of the interview, the lack of note-taking by the journalists present and the absence of interviewers from *L’Événement*, which had published the interview.⁴⁷ Suggesting the latter’s reporting was “pure hearsay and gossip,” Barthe categorically denies Sarah’s controversial statements:

The French actress didn’t apply the nickname of Iroquois to the French-Canadian race. She didn’t refer in disdainful terms to Sir Wilfrid Laurier (the Prime Minister). She did not say we were a priest-ridden population.⁴⁸

Letters berating and praising Bernhardt swelled the editorial pages of Quebec and Ontario newspapers, the Prime Minister himself telegraphing to Sarah a message of apology in which he dismisses *L’Événement* as “a newspaper which does not count for me.”⁴⁹

Even Bernhardt’s midnight departure from the City did not escape controversy and journalistic exploitation. *La Patrie* printed a despatch which states that a mob of 200 young people had given Sarah a “tumultuous departure.”⁵⁰ *Le Soleil* suggests the whole affair was merely a tempest in a teapot, noting that the Chief of Police asked the crowd of 300 to 400 people, assembled on the Côte du Palais, to remain calm. As Bernhardt’s carriage

⁴⁵ *L’Événement*, December 5, 1905, p. 5.

⁴⁶ M. Barthe’s letter was printed in the *Quebec Chronicle*, December 8, 1905, p. 5 and was quoted in part by the *Montreal Gazette*, December 8, 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Montreal Gazette*, December 8, 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ *La Patrie*, December 6, 1905, p. 12.

passed, only two eggs were thrown, haphazardly at that, and one single voice shouted “Down with the Jewess!”⁵¹ Newspapers across the country took up the *Gazette’s* headline “Bernhardt rotten-egged,” while Sarah herself protested vehemently to the editor of *La Patrie* against his modest version of events, insisting that members of her troupe had been beaten and punched, while she herself had heard the shout of “A bas la Juive! Mort à la Juive!”⁵²

In Ottawa, the clergy ignored Bernhardt’s presence with the exception of Monseigneur Routhier, who advised his flock to stay away from places of entertainment. The Governor-General and Lady Grey, however, invited the controversial actress to Rideau Hall for lunch, attended the evening performance at the Russell and presented her with a magnificent bouquet of carnations prior to her departure for Kingston, Hamilton and the United States. Meanwhile, in Quebec City, the pot continued to boil, the student demonstrations were defended or criticized, depending on the newspaper. *Le Soleil* published a nine-stanza poem written by a student, entitled “To Sarah Bernhardt” in which the young writer rudely uses the “tu” form of address as follows:

Leave us, insolent Jewess with the cynical smile. You who have just insulted
our people.⁵³

He criticizes her “servile talents,” her “chemical beauty,” her love of money and promises that brooms will sweep clean the streets of any trace of her passage.

Although *La Semaine religieuse de Québec* did not approve events taking place the night of Bernhardt’s departure and found them regrettable, this diocesan publication refrained from condemning the student violence. Instead, it attacks both Bernhardt and Réjane, a European actor, as well as the directors of the Auditorium.⁵⁴ This magnificent theatre had just opened in 1903, one of a series being built in the United States. Its board, consisting of (local) prominent Anglophones and Francophones, had succeeded in attracting the world-famous actress to the ancient walled city. But this success brought forth another circular letter from Archbishop Bégin, read in all Quebec City churches on Sunday, December 24, in which he forbade attendance at certain “unsavoury plays” presented at the Auditorium.⁵⁵ Later that week, the *Semaine religieuse* points out that Catholics were to be refused absolution if they attended plays at the

⁵¹ *Le Soled*, December 6, 1905, p. 16.

⁵² *La Patrie*, December 7, 1905, p. 8.

⁵³ *Le Soled*, December 6, 1905, p. 9. The poem was written in French (my translation).

⁵⁴ *La Semaine religieuse de Québec*, December 16, 1905, pp. 275-277. The article is entitled “A propos du théâtre” (“With Respect to the Theatre”).

⁵⁵ A brief news item is found in *L’Événement*, December 26, 1905, p. 1. I have been unable to locate the actual text of Bégin’s letter.

Auditorium and that such strong measures were necessary if this theatre were not to continue being “a school of perdition for the Catholic population of the district of Quebec.” The net result of all this was the formation of a group of three laymen by the directors of the Auditorium whose task was to act as “censors of all plays to be performed.” In a letter dated January 11 and published in *Le Soleil* and *L'Événement*, the Vice-President of the Auditorium Company notes the Archbishop's approval of these “prominent citizens” and his agreement to remove his ban on attendance at this theatre.⁵⁶

Bernhardt's sixth visit to Montreal in 1911 received advance publicity, thanks again to the Archbishop of Montreal. The Quebec newspaper, *Le Soleil*, announces on its front page the prelate's objections to the inclusion of *Sapho* and *La Sorcière* in the forthcoming program. Without condemning them formally, his Excellency expresses regrets that these plays would be presented on the Montreal stage.⁵⁷ One day later, the conservative *La Patrie* prints in excessively large characters the dramatic announcement: “Bernhardt gives in to Archbishop Bruchési's request.” The lead article then points out that Sarah, through her impresario Mr. Connor, had agreed by telegram to modify her program, substituting for the two controversial plays, *Madame X*, “a drama of maternal love.” Bernhardt's representative in Montreal, Mr. Murray, pointed out to reporters that this decision “would bring great joy to Catholics wanting to respect their Bishop's wishes and wishing at the same time to applaud the masterpieces of the French state,” but concedes, rather bluntly, the capricious nature of the ‘diva's’ artistic temperament:

we all know the whims, the angry outbursts and the stubbornness of this great tragedienne.⁵⁸

His Majesty's Theatre was filled to overflowing for *L'Aiglon* but Bernhardt's demeanour had changed significantly; her voice was much deeper and her movement on stage greatly restrained. In *La Tosca*, on January 25, the physical effort was simply too much for the 67-year-old actress; as the *Gazette* critic notes sympathetically, it was “not her greatest work, (but) a splendid remembrance to those who had seen her in earlier years.”⁵⁹ On balance, the largest audience in the history of His Majesty's Theatre was no doubt ensured by episcopal approbation. Police turned away unsuccessful ticket seekers, while frenetic applauding and numerous encores expressed the public's delight at

⁵⁶ *La Semaine religieuse de Québec*, December 30, 1905, p. 306. The article is entitled “Le théâtre de l'Auditorium.”

⁵⁷ *Le Soleil*, January 16, 1911, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *La Patrie*, January 11, 1911, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Montreal Gazette*, January 26, 1911, p. 4.

Sarah's melodramatic *Madame X*. But what is most ironic was the new version by Moreau of the *Joan of Arc* play. By its very theme, it was thought to be eminently suitable in content. The *Gazette* however, describes it as a "scenic production" whose unfamiliarity to local audiences

saved it from the condemnation of the Church, since it probably contains the same features which led to the intervention of Archbishop Bruchési and the withdrawal of *La Sorcière*.⁶⁰

Bernhardt returned to Montreal twice during World War I, despite the dangers of crossing the Atlantic and her weakened physical condition. In February 1915, her right leg, injured some years earlier, had so deteriorated that amputation was deemed necessary and unavoidable. Bernhardt's subsequent arrival in Canada in October 1916 was considered miraculous. For a whole week Montreal audiences applauded both Bernhardt's patriotically oriented performance and her own unflinching courage in confronting and mastering on the stage her painful infirmity.

In November 1917, Bernhardt concluded her last continental tour of America by spending another week in Montreal. For the first time, surprisingly, the theatre was half full and French Canadians were notably absent. In the week preceding her arrival, Harry Lauder had played at His Majesty's Theatre, helped out the Victory Loan campaign by making record sales of Victory Bonds and had raised funds to help maimed Scottish soldiers, widows and orphans. He had also addressed the Montreal Rotary Club, urging all Canadians, and particularly French Canadians, to fight for the "Mother Country." Given the fact that controversial conscription legislation had just come into force, the Quebec press was outraged and Mayor Martin of Montreal angrily demanded a retraction by Lauder of his insults to the French citizens of his province. The manager of His Majesty's Theatre then expressed public support for Lauder's criticism, with the net result that French Canadians boycotted His Majesty's during Bernhardt's visit the following week and for some time after, while both *La Presse* and *La Patrie* refused to publish ads announcing Sarah's final performances in French Canada.⁶¹ Sarah played to empty houses, moved on to New York and returned to France in January, 1918 to await the liberation of her country.

* * *

Episcopal censure of Bernhardt's visits to Montreal must be seen against

⁶⁰ *Montreal Gazette*, January 25, 1911, p. 2.

⁶¹ I have provided a more detailed description of Bernhardt's final visit to Montreal in "Sarah Bernhardt and the Montreal Fiasco of 1917," *Canadian Drama/l'Art dramatique canadien*, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 29-43.

the backdrop of a tradition dating back to the earliest days of New France. On January 16, 1694, the second Bishop of Quebec, Msgr. de Saint-Vallier warns against those plays

which hold piety and religion up to ridicule, which carry the flames of impurity into the heart, which seek to blacken reputations or, under the apparent pretext of reforming morals (*moeurs*), serve only to corrupt them.⁶²

The generalized allusion refers, of course, to the proposed presentation of *Tartuffe ou l'imposteur* and such spectacles as this were

not only dangerous but absolutely evil and criminal in themselves and cannot be witnessed without committing serious sin.⁶³

Two days later, the Bishop of Quebec responded to criticism of his point of view in a second letter twice as long as the first, in which he quotes the Councils, Fathers and Doctors of the Church:

Consistently plays have been regarded as sinful or as occasions of sin ... And even if they pretend to purge vice and correct manners, they nonetheless encourage vice, impurity and the mocking of religion.⁶⁴

Almost a century later, in 1792, the future Bishop of Quebec, Abbé Plessis would express similar opinions, while in the nineteenth century, many such strictures would be read from French Canadian pulpits. In an unusual pastoral letter, signed by ten prelates from Quebec and Ontario, and dated May 21, 1863, the faithful are exhorted to avoid bad books, mixed marriages, drunkenness and to refrain from embracing “the love of pleasures peculiar to our century,” meaning by this euphemism, of course, “les pièces de théâtre, les spectacles, la comédie et l’opéra” where “the laws of modesty are trampled underfoot.”⁶⁵ Transgressors of this dictum, they continue, should not be surprised to encounter the utmost severity at the tribunal of penance.⁶⁶

The Archbishop of Quebec diocese, Cardinal Taschereau, in his letter of May 1, 1874, denounces foreign (i.e. French) actors in whose performances “the most elementary morality and decency are outraged.”⁶⁷ Urging those souls under

⁶² Msgr. H. Tétu et M. l’abbé C. O. Gagnon, *Mandements, Lettres pastorales et Circulaires des Évêques de Québec*, Québec: Côté et Cie, 1887, vol. 1, p. 303.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Mandements ... de Québec*, vol. 4, p. 458.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Mandements ... de Québec (Nouvelle Série)*, vol. 1, p. 204.

his care not to throw money into the speculators' coffer, described as "a diabolical furnace" (the box-office), and citing the support of Catholic and Protestant papers as well, Taschereau forbids attendance under pain of sin.

Fabre's criticism of Bernhardt in 1880 and Bruchési's in 1905 confirm traditional wariness of the theatre as an occasion of sin. But seen in the context of a rapidly changing society, with industrial expansion, movement to the city, and the easy accessibility of all social classes to places of entertainment, their condemnations of Bernhardt reflect, not only moral concerns about the content of plays, but also the morality of the role-player and particularly the very authority of the Bishop himself as guardian of public morality.

In the context of the Bernhardt visits, one must consider the actual impact of episcopal pronouncements on the theatre-going Roman Catholic public. Bishop Fabre's reservations about the content of Bernhardt's performances, in 1880, were reasonable and shared by Protestant clergy of many denominations in the United States. Adultery was condemned on the stage, but in the case of Bernhardt, the unmarried mother of a child, personal morality was not dissociated from the theatrical heroine reciting dramatic verse. Bernhardt's impact on the French population of Montreal was feared because she was the first French-speaking actress of world renown to perform there. As for the Bishop's request that City Council cancel a dramatic performance on Christmas Day "on the basis of law," it underlined the separate roles of Church and State, as did the *Tartuffe* affair of 1694. The major difference, of course, was that at the later date secular law prevailed over ecclesiastical, with Bernhardt's being allowed to perform on December 25.

Archbishop Bruchési's objections to Bernhardt performances in 1905 reflect his concerns about "foreign influences" in Montreal theatres. He refers, of course, to European French actors and actresses, such as Réjane and Bernhardt, and castigates as well the management of His Majesty's, a theatre owned by Anglophones. In his second pastoral letter read on December 2, Bruchési attacks Bernhardt specifically for insulting the honour of French Canadians; he reproaches Catholics for attending her performances and expresses annoyance that a French morning paper (*Le Canada*) had published the names of prominent citizens seen at His Majesty's despite his warning. The prelate's concern with a growing liberal and secular climate in his diocese is obvious; he regards this gesture as an insult attacking the very authority with which he is endowed and threatens the directors of His Majesty's with "measures even more powerful than those of the State."

In Quebec City Archbishop Begin's words carried more weight than Bruchési's. A certain number of prominent French citizens did refrain from seeing Bernhardt perform; other laymen, however, did not, such as the Lieutenant-Governor of Quebec, the Dean of Students of the Séminaire de Québec and some members of the teaching staff. Begin's forbidding attendance at the Auditorium after Bernhardt's departure did affect box office receipts, so

much so that in January, 1906 a committee of three prominent citizens was chosen to censor proposed productions at the Auditorium. Bégin then agreed to lift his ban.

On balance, the Bishops' censure of Bernhardt plays, with the exception, perhaps, of Quebec City, did not affect attendance significantly. If anything, their condemnations served to publicize her presence and certainly put French Canada in the columns of American and French newspapers. They illustrate vividly the evolution of Canadian society and the tendency of lay people, both Catholic and Protestant, to make their personal judgements on the morality of plays and other entertainment. As well, the Bishops' comments reflect particular concern about outside negative influences (such as European troupes and authors) bringing dubious moral judgements, including anticlerical or prodivorce opinions, onto the hitherto closed society of Francophone Catholic Quebec. In retrospect, the clerical critiques of Bernhardt provide amusing reading, as well as insights into North American social and moral attitudes at the turn of the century. But, as I have already suggested, episcopal condemnation of the stage in French Canada began in the seventeenth century and continued in varying degrees up to the 1950s. The Bernhardt visits represent but one chapter in the book of moral reservations about the theatre, though there is at least one significant difference: Molière's treatment of religious hypocrisy in 1694 elicited two pastoral letters in one week from Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier; in 1905, a controversial female actress in her mid-sixties provoked the stunning total of three! Today we might consider such controversy merely a tempest in a teapot, but for the 1905 incident. Marred by anti-semitic undercurrents which were not repudiated publicly by the clergy of Quebec City,⁶⁸ it leaves one with a sense of unease and regret and suggests a facet of Quebec intellectual and ecclesiastical history that deserves serious exploration by scholars.

APPENDIX I

Bishop Edouard-Charles Fabre's letter and the accompanying critique of *Adrienne Lecouvreur* appeared in *La Minerve*, December 23, 1880. (The *Nouveau Monde* is a Montreal newspaper.)

⁶⁸ Bernhardt received the Last Sacraments on the afternoon of March 26, 1923 at her home in Paris and died that evening. Paris officials wanted to hold the funeral service in one of the major city churches, such as the Madeleine. But Bernhardt had already expressed her preference for a simple ceremony and had chosen to have it in Saint-François-de-Sales, the modest church she attended during her stays in Paris. Engraved on her tombstone in Père Lachaise Cemetery is a single word – "Bernhardt."

December 21, 1880

To the editor of the *Nouveau Monde*:

Sir: – I request you to publish in the columns of your paper the following criticism of a play announced on the theater programmes to take place this week. This criticism, prepared by a person authorized and fully competent, will be sufficient to make all good Catholics in Montreal understand that it is their rigorous duty to keep away from such plays. Besides the impropriety of giving these performances during the Advent days and on the feast of Christmas, all sincere and sensible Catholics will perceive in the more than doubtful morality pervading these pieces a grave peril to morals. I have the honor to be, sir,

Your very humble servant,
Edouard Chs.,
Bishop of Montreal

To His Lordship the Bishop of Montreal:

My Lord – in accordance with your request, I have examined the piece to be played on the 23rd, “Adrienne Lecouvreur,” and the following is the result of the examination.

The drama, almost to the end, hangs upon two adulterous liaisons.

Dialogues, loves, transparent allusions, everything in the piece tends to justify the prince and princess, hero and heroine of the drama and to represent their conduct as perfectly excusable in that high society.

The drama is immoral in its intrigue, immoral in the maxims which the actors utter; immoral finally in the compromising situations in which the principal characters are placed at different times. These, indeed, are bad lessons to unfold to the gaze of Christian families. The talent of those who will translate these lessons will serve but to increase the danger and to make still more fascinating and excusable those evil passions which constantly cause turmoil in the human heart.

APPENDIX II

The following letter was read by Monseigneur Bruchési, Archbishop of Montreal in St. James’ Cathedral on Sunday, November 26, 1905. The following English version appeared in the *Montreal Star* on November 27, 1905, p. 8. (The subheadings are editorial insertions.)

The Evil Theatres

In years past theatres have invaded, to use the expression, our city of

Montreal, and in spite of our reiterated warning, in spite of the requests we have addressed to the city press, notices in their favor have appeared from day to day, and, in consequence, crowds have been drawn to witness their representations. This, in fact, has been such as to cause us profound sadness. If indeed, we bless God for all that elevates the soul, deepens our faith and confirms it in the practice of virtue, how then can we be otherwise than deeply grieved at that which constitutes a danger to morals, and which is for the young a real school of sin. We therefore cannot lose sight of the fact that we have a mission to fulfill in your midst, and that one day we will have to account to the Sovereign Judge not only for our personal acts, but for your souls which are in our keeping. It is therefore in the accomplishment of the duty of pastor and of father that we raise our voice and signal the danger which threatens our society.

The expression, threaten, does not, however, go far enough. The evil is already amongst us, and is exercising serious ravages. Simply warning our people against this evil is not all that is required; it is the leaguering together of all the fathers and mothers of truly Christian families in order to combat the evil that the situation demands. It is proclaimed everywhere, and rightly, too, that intemperance is our great enemy, the enemy of good morals; the enemy of our doctrines and Christian traditions which it often contradicts; the enemy of those principles which render the family happy and honest, because the theatre never ceases to place before the eyes of spectators scenes of passion and criminal love.

Theatre and Morals

Let it not be said that the theatre in itself possesses nothing reprehensible, and that it even exercises a moral effect upon the people. We do not here refer to theories, but rather to practices. We take the theatre such as it exists and such as we have it here in Montreal. Let those who frequent the theatres be sincere and let them say if they ever left these plays better men and better women, or if these plays have inspired lessons of virtue.

Almost all of the pieces of the French stage are played here one after the other. Those pieces which they did not dare to put on a few years ago for fear of alarming our people, 'simple and timid,' as was said at that time, are now produced without fear, without scruple, and without the least modification. This sad education of the people has been gradually going on. Did not a certain actress, whose name we would not pronounce, repeat only a few months ago the ignoble scenes which is her custom to produce elsewhere? We know that more than one person was indignant, but we ask why did those people who respect themselves go to hear her. We have no need in this Catholic city of such literature; of these plays imported from a centre where Christian marriage is mocked at and where morality and modesty are only vain words.

Bad Plays too Numerous

Unfortunately too many pious families and too many leading citizens frequent these representations. Their place is not there. They allow themselves to be drawn into it like the rest, but they forget that they are giving a very sad example to people whom they should edify. We do not pretend that all the representations in our theatres are bad, but the bad ones are, alas, too numerous, and how many there are really reprehensible? It is true that one becomes accustomed to evil, but this is certainly a lamentable symptom.

During the present week one theatre in particular will attract large crowds, and we deeply regret the programme that has been decided upon, for amongst the pieces there are plays bad and condemnable. As for talent and genius in the execution and interpretation of the play, this can only increase the danger. We beseech, therefore, our pious families still attached to duty and virtue to be on their guard, and to abstain from what will be to them an occasion for sin, and to prefer the home of their household and the salvation of their children's souls.

APPENDIX III

This letter by Archbishop Bruchési was read in all Montreal churches on Sunday, December 3, 1905. This English version appeared in the *Montreal Star* on December 4, 1905, p. 3. (The sub headings are editorial insertions.)

Msgr. Bruchesi and the Theatres

In raising our voice last Sunday against bad theatres and in asking you not to attend the reprehensible plays which were to be presented during the week we were only acting in the discharge of a conscientious duty which our position as first pastor imposed upon us.

In spite of all that has been said to the contrary we know that our words fell upon attentive ears. Many in fact of the most distinguished citizens, in order to meet our wishes, sacrificed the tickets which they had already purchased, and such an act being a noble example to others we are happy to offer them our congratulations.

A great many others unfortunately took no notice of our letter and went to hear plays in which the Church is insulted and Christian morals are trampled underfoot; and we have to confess to-day that such conduct on their part fills us with grief and surprise.

The plea has been given that the pastoral warning came too late, but this is a sad excuse, indeed, for when the warning was given the plays had been announced and, perhaps, the tickets were purchased, but the theatre was not open. If you were to learn, very dear brethren, that a medicine which had been sold to you as an excellent remedy was nothing more than a fatal poison, would you take the same even if it had been paid for?

It has also been said that these plays were interpreted by an artist of incomparable merit, but does this fact render them less immoral or less dangerous?

Oh, how little logic there is in some minds, and are not religious convictions very far from being deeply rooted in certain souls?

We defy the most brilliant orators and the most celebrated actresses to come here to our city and ridicule our history or insult the honor of the Canadian name, for we know that they would receive hisses rather than applause.

In a word, the patriotic sentiment of the country would rise in protest.

Remember, also, very dear brethren, the excitement caused recently in society circles by the appearance of a novel, quite insignificant in itself, but in which some not very flattering things for our people were said as well as for certain persons evidently aimed at in the writings.

No one appeared to notice the plot which was immoral, but how many protesting articles were written, and how much displeasure was manifested because of the wounding of our national pride?

Insult to Church

Likewise at the theatre no one should be permitted to attack our country, or the memory of our departed statesmen. But in the present case it is the Church which is insulted. Her history is falsified and her blessed influence down through the ages is strangely ignored.

The scenes offered to the spectators in the theatre are, after all, but scenes of criminal passion, of vengeance, of jealousy, of adultery, of murder, and of suicide. Must one be, indeed, scrupulous to be afraid or to flee from these scenes? The evil is exhibited with the seduction of genius, and this is not a sufficient reason for contemplating it and applauding the actor or actress who flaunts it before our eyes.

Alas, we have here a condition of the soul, painful in the extreme to realize.

Believe us, very dear brethren, we would never have dreamed of warning you against plays that might be of a nature to provoke in your minds elevated thoughts or noble sentiments. To-day, however, we invite all sincere men, who saw the plays to which we refer, to tell us, with their hands on their hearts, if we were not within our prerogatives, and if we were not quite in the right in speaking to you as we have done. It is Catholics to whom we are addressing these words. It is not their Archbishop, it is God whom they have offended, and can they think of it without remorse?

Enjoyment, very dear brethren, is of short duration, but how humiliating is the stain that is left in the soul?

There are journalists, whom we consider friends, and in whom we have often noticed excellent dispositions, as well as Christian sentiments, who have

considered it their duty to publish favorable comments on these plays, which they would have otherwise declared bad and condemnable. They have tried to conciliate that which can never be conciliated, and they will permit us to say to them that they have caused us the greatest sadness.

List of Participants

But a French morning paper has done even more – for after having published our pastoral letter, it gave a long list of citizens noticed at the theatre. Protestations which have reached us lead us to believe that this list contained the names of most honorable families, not one member of which was present. We resent, of course, this affront, which a Protestant sheet from another province did not fail to notice. But the injury does not stop with our person: it reaches in fact the authority with which we are clothed, and we leave the task to Catholics to qualify it as it deserves.

Now, very dear brethren, let us say to you that it is less against certain theatrical plays than against bad theatres in general that we have put you on your guard. In the name, therefore, of our holy religion, in the name of the young, who are dear to us, and in the name of the innocence of your children, we wish you to be faithful to our paternal counsels.

There is in our midst, no one ignores it, a theatre in particular where representations are given of the most obscene nature, and where very often dramas of the most perverse kind are played, and against which complaints have reached us from many quarters. Let the managers of this theatre remember, that here in Canada the criminal code punishes very severely scenes of this nature. The civil authorities charged with the protection of good morals will permit us to remind them that they are under the greatest obligation to watch these plays and act when duty so requires it.

For our part, in the legitimate exercise of our right and of our episcopal authority, we now warn these managers that if they continue in the course they have been following for some time past, we will have recourse against them to measures more efficacious perhaps than the sanction of the laws of the state.

We will not recede from the performance of our sacred duty, and we will then see who wish to be the submissive children of the church or who wish to scorn its commandments and its morals.

It is our most ardent desire, however, not to be under the necessity of exercising this painful duty, and we ask our Lord to console us in hearing our prayer.

PAUL, Archbishop of Montreal

Popular as "Divine Sarah", Sarah Bernhardt was one of the most excellent actors of the 19th century France. This biography underlines her childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. Sarah Bernhardt was a grand theatrical diva of all times who graced the French stage even before Hollywood was born. Called by her admirers as the "Divine Sarah", she is known to be the first international stage star ever. It is hard to segregate her life from art as it was deeply engraved in the core of her being. All the artistic pursuits which she undertook carried an essence of her surpassable talent. As a child, Sarah was quite sensitive to her surroundings, absorbing all the elements she could in her ethereal self.