



# Sarah Bernhardt



*Sarah Bernhardt (1844 - 1923) was an actress of French theatre and early cinema. During the 1870s she achieved great success in France through her acting and amazing voice. She acted for and with the greatest of French theatres, quickly leading her to export her talent throughout Europe and the Americas. She established a worldwide reputation as a diva and earned the nickname "The Divine Sarah".*

Each of the scenes you'll explore recounts the memoirs of Lysiane Bernhardt, Sarah's granddaughter. It is she who tells us who her grandmother was and how they spent their summers in the *Pointe des Poulains*.

## Scene 1: The Thunderbolt

My grandmother discovered Belle-Ile and la *Pointe des Poulains* in August 1894, the year after her return from a triumphant world tour while visiting her friend, the painter George Clairin who was in Brittany. The charm of the peninsula so affected her that she purchased the fort: "It was so inaccessible, so uninhabitable, so uncomfortable and therefore it delighted me". Which could certainly not be said of the family when they discovered the fort in 1896, the year of my birth, in this back of beyond.

## Scene 2: The family, according to her heart

Our company numbered many every summer and to welcoming her Little Quirinal, **the Great** (this is how my sister Simone, six years older than me, and I called her) had two villas built. *The villa of Five Parts of the World* for the family and the villa Lysiane for friends. They were mainly artists - composer Reynaldo Hann, poet Edmond Haraucourt, painters George Clairin and Louise Abbéma ... They were a second family for us, full of uncles, aunts or cousins.

## Scene 3: The domain of Sarah Bernhardt

Many improvements were made primarily to the fort to make it habitable. Each of the buildings making up the estate was richly decorated. In the *Villa of Five Parts of the World*, my nanny and I lived in Asia, my father in Africa, my mother in the Americas, Simone in Europe and our servant in Oceania. And so, we would migrate from one continent to another !

Her estate was grew from year to year - after the fort and villas as she acquired the Penhoët farm to supply milk, eggs and chickens and built a stable and a house on the road to Sauzon for the estate keeper. Then she bought the Penhoët mansion, a large building made of red bricks, five hundred meters to the east of the fort, and now no longer standing after it was destroyed by the Germans during the Second World War.

## Scene 4: Ode to Sarah

If so many artists and poets were surrounding the Great, it is because she was a muse for many of them. All together, they evoked the tenderness and admiration towards this eccentric and talented woman. The poem by Edmond Rostand : "Queen of the attitude, Princess of the gesture ..." and the portrait of Sarah in White Satin with her two dogs "The enchantress in her lair" painted by Clairin in 1876 bear witness to this.



## Scene 5: Arrival at Belle-Ile

The Great's travels around the world were a little bit more extravagant than the ones we did each summer from Paris to Pointe des Poulains. And after many a long hour of travel, we would disembark at Le Palais, Sauzon or sometimes even at the *Pointe des Poulains*, close to the fort. It was like a fairground attraction, the "menagerie" as local people called it...

## Scene 6 : The Menagerie

The animals of Belle-Ile led a very enjoyable life in the Little Quirinal. There were horses and dogs at the stable. The fold included twenty sheep. There was a backyard with chickens, rabbits, pigs and pigeons at the farm. She also had a barn that housed a few cows. But her most familiar companions were not commonplace for Belle-Ile: pumas, monkeys, parrots, chameleons, an owl Grand Duc, baby crocodile and boa ...

## Scene 7 : The botanical garden

The tombolo *Pointe des Poulains* is a place very exposed to the natural elements. The wind and the sea sprays made the vegetation difficult.

Sarah and her gardener M. Terrien's obsession was planting ! t was necessary to work the soil, trace foot ways of white gravel and mark out the lawns and flowerbeds. After many failures, on the Pointe des Poulains the Great managed to acclimate plants we had never seen or we no longer see : cineraria maritime, acanthus, bluebells ... hedges of tamarisk and gorse of Spain allowed her to shield the garden from the wind and protect her plantations.

## Scene 8 : Recipes of Sarah Bernhardt

The pleasures of the table were very important to the Great. She liked to prepare the butter herself, and preserved pickles, onions or fennel in vinegar. She would make meat pâté and many dishes quite difficult to digest. At the time we ate a lot, but the onshore winds and salt air took care of cleaning our stomachs.

## Scene 9 : A typical day

"Do something with your ten finger !" my grandmother would often suggest. She hated it when someone was sat around twiddling their thumbs. Up at dawn, she would wake those who wanted to hunt. Then it was time for breakfast and fishing, a bath of seaweed, lunch at 12:30 sharp ! Then a nap, tennis at five o'clock, dinner at eight. With good grace, everyone fell in line with the agenda set by our Queen.

## Scene 10: The good lady of Belle-île

Obviously we did not go unnoticed. But I think that for the Great, it was not just about making an appearance. She felt it was her duty to help the people of Belle-Ile. When the fishermen weren't doing well, she would organize mornings Gala in Paris in aid of the fishermen of Belle-Ile. She created a cooperative bakery on the island in 1912.

## Scene 11: Latter years

We at Belle-île learnt of the announcement of general mobilisation and the declaration of war on 1 August 1914. War, the amputation of her right leg due to an old injury that was a cause of suffering and her last tour in the United States meant we left the *Pointe des Poulains* and would not return until the summer of 1919.



After five years of absence and the requisition of the fort during the war, the estate was in a poor state. She mourned for her Clairin and her dear poet Edmond Rostand, who had died the previous year from the Spanish flu. The last summer we spent together was on *the Pointe des Poulains* in 1922. Feeling the end approaching and needing money she sold her estate a few months before her death in March 1923 during the filming of a movie.

*That's it. I will not return to Belle-île-en-Mer. I would not go back there but my heart is always with those who stayed there ...*

Lysiane Bernhardt (1896 - 1977)

*Listen to the voice of Sarah Bernhardt at number 12 of the audioguide. You will hear how she recites the poem "The Old People" by Rosemonde Gerard. Let you plunge to this tremulous and haunting voice.*

## The fort of Sarah'

*Now we would like to invite you to experience a special atmosphere that will take you to another time, cross the garden and go through the gates of the cave of the enchantress.*

## Chronology

- October 22, 1844 - born in Paris to an unknown father
- 1860 - entered the Conservatoire
- 1862 - joined the Comédie Française (French Theater of Comedy)
- 1863 - contract with the theater of gym
- 1864 - birth of his son Maurice, father is unknown
- 1866 - joined the Odeon Theatre
- 1870 - declaration of war with Prussia
- 1872 - back to the Comédie Française
- 1879 - contract with Gaiety Theater, London
- 1880 - new break with the Comédie française. Creation of her theatrical company, then toured in London, Brussels, Copenhagen and many French cities. Departure of her troupe to America.
- May 1881 - end of the U.S. tour and return to France
- 1882 - marriage with Aristides Damala, Greek diplomat who became an actor
- 1895 - acquisition of Fort on Belle Isle
- 1907 - publication of her autobiography 'My Double Life'
- 1914 - presentation of the Legion of Honor
- 1915 - amputation of her right leg
- 1916 - performances at the front for the French troops
- March 26, 1923 - death and burial in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris



## Why is this museum ?

In 2000, the **Conservatoire du Littoral\*** bought the *Pointe des Poulains* and undertook first to restore the landscape of the site, supply electricity to the lighthouse, trampled by high attendance and overrun by unwanted species of plants.

From the beginning, the CEL gave cultural and historical value to the restoration project. In 2005, the villa Lysiane as well as the lighthouse of the Poulains opened their doors to the public. The main theme is of course nature but we can see the premises of the museum of Sarah Bernhardt in the villa Lysiane.

In 2007, the villa of Five Parts of the World and the fort are then opened. Inviting visitors to learn more about her personality and her presence on Belle-Ile thanks to the audio tour and the reconstitution of her first residence in the fort. This museum, consecrated to the actress, is the only one in existence anywhere in the world. It pays tribute to her talent, her bad temper and generosity to Belle-Ile.



### \*The Conservatoire du Littoral.

This is a public administrative institution founded in 1975. This institution is responsible for acquiring natural sites located by the sea or expanses of water of more than 1000 ha and threatened by urbanisation or requiring rapid restoration.

The territory of the Conservatoire du Littoral on Belle-Ile is managed by the service team of the Natural Areas of municipalities.

