

# The Divine Bernhardt

**Madame Sarah**, by Cornelia Otis Skinner (Houghton Mifflin. 356 pp. \$6.95), pays tribute to the legendary actress with the body of a hungry sparrow and the vitality of a tigress. Philip Burton is president and director of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy.

By PHILIP BURTON

THERE are several motives which lead biographers to their choice of subject: the historian's impulse to place a great man in perspective, the iconoclast's urge to destroy a myth, the critic's feeling of a need for reappraisal, the admirer's desire to proclaim the wonders of his idol. There is no doubt that Cornelia Otis Skinner's motive is the last of these, and the result is a warm vivid, amusing, and moving account of an actress who became in her long lifetime a world phenomenon, both on and off stage. Miss Skinner, in her pell-mell enthusiasm for her subject, occasionally lapses into careless writing—"efficacy" for "efficiency," and clichés like "first saw the light of day" and "like a duck to water"—but much can be forgiven for the pleasure she communicates, which was indeed true of Bernhardt herself.

I never saw the "Divine Sarah" and I do not really regret it, because I could only have done so, as Miss Skinner did, when the famous golden voice had gone and the climax of her performance was to push herself up from her chair and stand bravely on her one remaining leg. But I do regret having seen the silent movies of the old lady, where her magic was reduced to ridiculous and badly photographed pantomime. A fairer photographic record would have been one of the faces of audiences in London, New York, Dallas, Toronto, Constantinople, Moscow, and Vienna, who were spellbound by this woman with the body of a hungry sparrow and the vitality and excitement of a tigress, even though she spoke in a language few of them could understand. It would have been kinder and more just to her memory if she had retired before either old age or the movies had claimed her. Then she would have been remembered as Siddons and Garrick are remembered, by written accounts of her extraordinary performances. *Madame Sarah* does much to restore the balance for Bernhardt, both as woman and as actress.

The woman was a fascinating complex of contradictions. She was the illegitimate daughter of a successful courtesan, who also provided her with two illegitimate half-sisters. Yet when Sarah herself became pregnant at nineteen, her scandalized mother put her out of the house. Sarah seemed to have neither the looks nor the stamina for the arduous theatrical life that became hers. She was wraith-thin, with a too-prominent nose and an unmanageable mop of red hair, and from childhood she was tuberculous. In spite of her remarkable effect upon audiences everywhere, she never ceased to suffer extreme tortures of stage-fright before going out to face the "beloved monster." Nevertheless, on several occasions, particularly in Paris, when her publicized actions had led her to expect a hostile reception, she insisted on appearing, and her defiant courage combined with her artistry turned incipient catcalls into almost hysterical displays of devotion. While her mother was Dutch and Jewish, Sarah herself was zealously and extravagantly French; the shame of the 1870-71 defeat by Germany burned deep in her, but she lived to exult in the restoration of national honor in 1919.

And what of the actress? Inevitably the comparison with Duse must arise. She was Bernhardt's junior by fifteen

years, and so was more sensitive to the winds of change in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Only the truly perceptive understood the nature of Duse's magic and welcomed her new acting style with its luminous intelligence, which was essential for the true interpretation of the modern playwrights. The theater was a means to an end for Duse, so much so that in dissatisfaction she could retire from it for eleven years at the height of her career, though she did come back to die in harness. For Bernhardt the theater was life; better a Texas tent or a London music hall than no auditorium at all. Both Bernhardt and Duse were extraordinary natural phenomena, and perhaps their different effects might be compared to experiencing Niagara Falls from the "Maid of the Mist" and experiencing the Grand Canyon while standing alone on its rim.

It is strange that Bernhardt's *The Art of the Theater* is not included in Miss Skinner's bibliography. It was the actress's deathbed gift of "advice that I should like to give beginners, especially as scarcely any was given to me." Bernhardt is often dismissed—by people who never saw her act, or saw her only when she was a crippled grotesque—as being excessively theatrical and lacking in emotional truth. To refute these accusations, here are some of her own dicta: "It is necessary to feel all the sentiments that agitate the soul of the character it is desired to represent." "I have touched real death in my different deaths." "What has been called the labor of our art can only be the quest for truth." "It is always the artist who is closest to the real in the ideal who will triumph."

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

### K I N F O L K

Everybody in the second column is a brother or sister of somebody in the first column. Dennis Aig and his sister Marlene, both of Queens Village, N.Y., ask you to match the siblings up with each other and with the play or novel in which they have their being. It's all straightened out on page 48.

Catherine Earnshaw ( )	1. Ben	A. <i>The Bridge of San Luis Rey</i>
Charles Hamilton ( )	2. Clifford	B. <i>David Copperfield</i>
Clara Peggotty ( )	3. Dan'l	C. <i>Death of a Salesman</i>
Hepzibah Pyncheon ( )	4. Esteban	D. <i>An Enemy of the People</i>
Jo March ( )	5. Hindley	E. <i>Gone with the Wind</i>
Manuel ( )	6. Irina	F. <i>The House of the Seven Gables</i>
Olga Prozorov ( )	7. Maggie	G. <i>Little Women</i>
Dr. Thomas Stockmann ( )	8. Meg	H. <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>
Tom Tulliver ( )	9. Melanie	I. <i>Peter Pan</i>
Viola ( )	10. Michael	J. <i>Three Sisters</i>
Wendy Darling ( )	11. Peter	K. <i>Twelfth Night</i>
Willy Loman ( )	12. Sebastian	L. <i>Wuthering Heights</i>

# Portrait of the Artist as Crab

*Letters of James Joyce, Vols. II and III, edited by Richard Ellmann (Viking, 1,056 pp. \$25), completes the voluminous personal record of the author of "Ulysses" and "Finnegans Wake." Leon Edel, who had glimpses of Joyce on the Left Bank in the late 1920s and early '30s, is himself an editor of letters and a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer.*

By LEON EDEL

IN 1957 Stuart Gilbert edited a volume of James Joyce's letters, and I wrote at the time that far from constituting a "portrait of the artist" they offered a melancholy picture of "Joyce-against-the-world"—and the skill with which the novelist turned this into a legend of "the world-against-Joyce." Now Richard Ellman, Joyce's biographer, has compiled two further volumes, adding more than 1,200 letters to the canon and some 200 letters and documents written by other hands.

The new volumes further document and reinforce my earlier impression. You would have expected the author of *Ulysses* to be among the great letter-writers of the century. But letters require a feeling for one's correspondents; they are one of the friendliest forms of intercourse, and Joyce did not possess the art of friendship. What you hear in these two stout volumes is a perpetual cry for money, for help, for love. The world is repeatedly proclaimed cheat and liar, and Joyce its crucified martyr. The letters are a mixture of cadging, self-advertisement, charlatanism, pedantry, and supreme arrogance, by which Joyce sought to defend himself against his private demons.

The weight and abundance of these terrible writings of a desperate man risks weariness to the spirit and to the reader's sympathy. Too much is told, more than is needed for the purposes of truth and history. Anguish is made redundant. Ellmann recognizes some of the shortcomings, but he makes it his thesis that Joyce's self-mockery and Chaplinesque vaudeville injected a relieving note of pathos into these communications to family and friends. Stephen Spender recently remarked that if one does not keep in mind Joyce's sense of comedy "he may find Joyce's letters oppressive and, in the long run, almost unbearable." However, when one comes to the es-

sence of the matter, laughter is impossible.

For these letters demonstrate, more clearly than ever, the pathological elements in the art of James Joyce. The writer was so alienated from the world, so cut off from empathy with fellow humans, that he was ruthless with family, cruel to friends, and surprisingly infantile in his recurrent demands that the world give him recognition even before he gave anything to it. His talent, when he finally showed it, was accepted; yet Joyce continued to cry betrayal, for in his alienation everything was pulled inward, into himself and his own "madness in art." The result was a constant paranoid distortion of realities. The difficulties he encountered in being published, for instance, are now legend; yet it can be seen that they were no greater than those of other gifted writers with new ways of saying things. Those famous four-letter words that antagonized the printers and are now commonplace offer merely a paradox—that one of the most richly endowed verbal artists in the history of language felt a need to resort to the poverty of scribbles on toilet walls.

It is not difficult to document from these letters the ways in which the realities of Joyce's existence were constantly deformed, parodied, satirized. To say this is not to dismiss the power of his satire or the greatness of his verbal imagination—the only kind of imagination he truly had. He could imagine nothing save "the book of himself." It is always Joyce on Joyce, and it is a Joyce consuming himself with the eternal rage of his art. For the Irish rebel writing was a form of revenge against a host of imaginary foes, and he achieved it with "dagger definitions."

The essential story of Joyce's life remains unchanged: how he quit Ireland in poverty and anger although many held out hands of friendship to him; how he wandered, pathetic and unheroic, until he settled in backwater polyglot Trieste and taught at Berlitz; how he exploited his talented brother, Stanislaus, one of the martyred siblings of literary history; and how finally, with the aid of Ezra Pound, he pulled himself together, went to live in Paris, and did his most characteristic work. Here his creativity found its greatest release. He discovered that the world was only too ready to accept him even if it did not always admire *Ulysses* and scoffed at *Work in Progress* (which later became

*Finnegans Wake*). Harriet Weaver endowed him; the sympathetic ladies of the rue de l'Odeon, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, published, protected, cushioned him. But he quarreled with everyone, he sued at the drop of a hat, he invited strife. He was one of the great "injustice collectors" of literature. I think it could be demonstrated that Joyce needed the censorship and contumely of the world: he could thereby vent his rage and consider himself one of the insulted and injured. Some of his letters read as if written by Dostoevsky's soliloquizing functionary in *Notes from the Underground*.

Ellmann concedes there are "traces" of pathology in Joyce's queer, erotic, childish letters to Nora, his common-law wife. He speaks of "fetishism, anality, paranoia, and masochism," yet asks us to turn away from Krafft-Ebing to recognize Joyce's "Circean beguilements" and "vaudeville routines." But no amount of self-mockery or literary heroics can conceal the sad, ugly truths disclosed. Strange laughter can still be the laughter of madness, and Joyce's wry comedy is a comedy of the helplessness and anger and aggression of an artist filled with grandiosities who walked "a way a lone a last a loved a long the," as he told us in the uncompleted final sentence of *Finnegans Wake* which leads us back to the book's beginning. It was one of his many insights into his personal self-containment.

TO the miseries of his psyche were added the physical torments of a dozen eye operations for cataract, general poor health, partial poverty at first and self-impoverishment by a grandeur of spending. He had bouts of drunkenness; his father had been a barroom cadger, and Joyce made himself into one on a gargantuan scale. He had periods of deep depression, during which he moved from "great irritation and impatient fury" to sudden fits of weeping. This is the haunted, driven existence to which we are made spectators; and with this there was Joyce's way — I suppose through the combination of helplessness and mockery—of commanding always a circle of loyal friends who were hypnotized by his genius and prepared to immolate themselves on its altar. They received scant thanks for their pains.

Ellmann has edited the documents with scholarly thoroughness. If their dreary totality is a kind of heaping of Pelion on Ossa, one is nevertheless grateful that Joyce's self-portrait can be viewed in all its colors. A corrective now exists against the prevailing tendency to use Joyce's art to soften our vision of his human failings. In the end, these volumes should help to restore a sense of proportion both to Joycean criticism and to biography.