

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Divine Sarah and Eggs Sardou

Harrison Ford's fedora, which he wore as Indiana Jones, is now in the Smithsonian along with Sinatra's bowties and Judy Garland's ruby slippers. Worn by the likes of tough guys, Cagney and Bogart, and seen so often *in Film Noir* movies, the fedora was extremely popular in the United States from the 1920s into the 1950s. The hat (usually of soft felt) with the floppy brim originated with a play, and the first to wear it was none other than the famous French actress, "The Divine" Sarah Bernhardt.



Bogie in Fedora



Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones

The play was entitled *Fédora* and written by Victorien Sardou. It premiered in Paris on December 11, 1882 (the day Fiorella LaGuardia, Mayor of New York, was born). Miss Bernhardt played the heroine, Princess Fédora Romazova, who wore a similar style of chapeau.



Victorien Sardou (September 5, 1831 – November 8, 1908) was a prolific French dramatist who is perhaps best remembered for another play he wrote in 1887 for Sarah Bernhardt, *La Tosca*. From it, Puccini based his famous opera. George Bernard Shaw probably would have considered this Paris-born playwright a melo-dramatist, for he belittled this type of bourgeois drama as "Sardoodledom". Still, Sardou (along with Émile Augier and Alexandre Dumas *fils*) dominated the French stage in the late nineteenth century. Bernhardt also appeared in Sardou's *Théodora* (1884), *Cléopâtre* (1890), *Gismonda* (1894), *Spiritisme* (1897) and *La Sorcière* (1903).



Victorien Sardou in Vanity Fair, 1880

Many of these plays by Sardou appeared in New Orleans, and it was there that a dish was created to honor the great dramatist. The Alciatoire culinary skills were at their best when Antoine's Restaurant first presented *Eggs Sardou*, a dish consisting of an exquisite assembly of poached eggs, creamed spinach and artichoke bottoms topped with hollandaise sauce. *Eggs Sardou* served at most restaurants today is usually composed of these same basic ingredients, but the original version is much more sophisticated. The magazine *Saveur* describes the Antoine's preparation as "anchovies tucked in between the egg and

artichoke, and a thick hollandaise sauce blanketing the entire dish, scattered with handfuls of minced black truffle, parsley, and ham and served with elegant fried asparagus spears." They write, "It has been served in this manner at the French Quarter restaurant Antoine's since 1908, when it was invented there to celebrate its namesake." It was also the year Victorien Sardou died.



Eggs Sardou

Galatoire's does a simplified version of this New Orleans classic, where the restaurant touts the "tangy lemon flavors in the hollandaise" that "play beautifully against the creamed spinach". Galatoire's reports that it cooks and cleans an average of 200 artichoke bottoms daily, used in *Eggs Sardou* as well as its best sellers, *Crabmeat Sardou* and *Crabmeat Yvonne*.

Incidentally, another famous culinary creation, *Lobster Thermidor*, came into being in honor of Victorien Sardou. The playwright's four-act 1891 dramatic play *Thermidor* took its name from a summer

month in the French Republican Calendar, during which the Reign of Terror ended and Maximilien Robespierre was overthrown. The dish is named for Sardou's play. Its oven-browned creamy, cheesy mixture of cooked lobster meat, egg yolks with sherry or brandy requires extensive preparation, and is therefore rarely prepared at home.

An eccentric brilliant star in the firmament of great performers, Sarah Bernhardt visited New Orleans often. She was born Henriette-Rosine Bernard on October 23, 1844, the illegitimate daughter (and a skinny, sickly child) of a Dutch Jewish woman and (it is believed) Edouard Bernard, a French *avocat*. Despite these modest beginnings, she had royalty at her feet. Edward, VII, Prince of Wales was an admirer, and Belgian Prince Charles-Joseph-Eugene-Henri de Ligne fathered her only son, Maurice. The crowned heads showered her with gifts and jewelry, and so did America's captains of industry. Railway magnate William Henry Vanderbilt wept openly into a big handkerchief after attending every one of her performances one season. In St. Petersburg, a red carpet escorted her across the snow to the theatre. After her command performance there, Czar Alexander III bowed to her.

"Acting is all internal, but must be externalized," Sarah said. She built all her magnificent characterizations from the inside out, and her audiences adored her. At Booth's Theater in New York in 1880 she created her signature role, Marguerite Gauthier in *La Dame aux Camélias* by Dumas *fils*. She would play that part more than 3,000 additional times over the next 43 years. Titled in English as *Camille*, it is the basis for Verdi's opera, *La Traviata*. The lady really could *act*. With clarity of voice and such emotional and physical realism, she certainly could be said to be the greatest actress of the nineteenth century. Americans loved Sarah (billed as "The Divine"), and the feeling was mutual. "I adore this country where women reign," she said. Her devoted fans (both men and women alike) were known as *sarahdoteurs*.



"The Divine" Sarah Bernhardt

Incredibly thin (in an age that called for Rubenesque figures in hourglass corsets) and with frizzy reddish-blond hair, it was the power of her acting that captured the hearts of one and all. With great talent came some unusual quirks. Some could be chalked up to eccentricity, while others could be described as pure marketing genius. A skull was kept on her desk, and she is said to have studied her roles while in an upholstered coffin. The French artist, Alphonse Mucha, did her theatrical posters and even some of her costumes. He photographed her in his studio lying in the coffin with eyes closed, arms folded and surrounded by flowers. This photograph was widely circulated and gave rise to the rumors that there was where she slept (and received her lovers). When she traveled, so did the coffin, which heightened the publicity.

She kept a bizarre menagerie, which included a huge wolfhound, a petite tigress named Minette, a lynx on a leash and a lion in need of perfume. On a visit to Mademoiselle Sarah, she may have greeted you in a white gown while reclining on a plush divan canopied with exotic oriental hangings supported by velvet-covered spears. On one such visit, Monsieur Dumas *fils* had the misfortune of having his straw hat devoured by her pet puma. On a tour through New Orleans, she purchased an alligator in Louisiana she named Ali-Gaga, which slept comfortably beneath the bedcovers at night (we can only guess whether she slept in her coffin or with her reptilian sidekick). He followed her around backstage and on her private railroad car, which had walls of inlay wood, Turkish carpets, brass gas lamps, luxurious sofas, piano and potted palms. Ali-Gaga died, it was reported, by consuming too much champagne.

In Florida the situation was not so tame. A staged hunt was arranged where, at the appropriate time, Miss Bernhardt was given the line that had been secured around an alligator's leg. Attired in a wide brimmed hat with pheasant feathers, a white suede jacket and polished high-heeled boots, she grabbed hold of the hibernating reptile on the other end. The alligator, shipped back to her menagerie, was still in this sleepy state when uncrated in Paris. Her small pet dog, a Manchester Terrier, barked at the new houseguest only to be eaten alive by the newly awakened gator. She directed her servant to shoot the beast, whose head she soon had mounted in her hallway. She would point out to friends and visitors "My beloved little dog ... his tomb!"

Sarah Bernhardt visited the French Opera House on Bourbon Street in 1892, and Creole writer Léona Querouze published a poem, "*Le Sonnet Impromptu*" dedicated to her. Back in France, the famous actress persuaded Émile Zola to write his famous *J'Accuse*, which turned French public opinion in favor of Dreyfus. She did many successful tours of America and several "farewell" ones. In 1915, gangrene struck her right leg and she threatened doctors to amputate or she'd shoot herself in the knee. They did, and she continued her career in spite of her handicap. She adapted her stage presence accordingly with the actors gathered around her while she was seated. For ovations she stood on one leg, holding on to a piece of furniture and gesturing with one arm. She rallied French troops on the front lines from a shabby armchair, ending her performance with a rousing "*Aux armes!*" The soldiers rose cheering and weeping.

She made one of her farewell tours to New Orleans that same year. A Liberty-Loan campaign to raise money for the war (arranged by Henry Groffman) was about to parade, but rain threatened. Like so many carnival krewes, before and after, Sarah could not be persuaded to not roll. In a carriage covered with roses and drawn by six white horses, she proclaimed, "My soldiers in France are standing knee-deep in blood and grime. I shall ride in the parade if no one else does!" After

thanking Mr. Groffman in French, he replied with the only French words he could muster, the famous New Orleans department store:
"Maison Blanche!"

The indomitable Sarah Bernhardt never gave up. She acted until her death in 1923, having made a success in the movies as well as on the stage. Renowned New Orleans musician, painter and self-proclaimed anti-modernist, George Schmidt, painted a vivid historical painting of Sarah Bernhardt meeting the Razy Dazzy Spasm Band in Storyville on one of her visits to New Orleans. A headstrong, creative spirit lingers on long after her last visit, and George has been known to sport a fedora around town.

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