

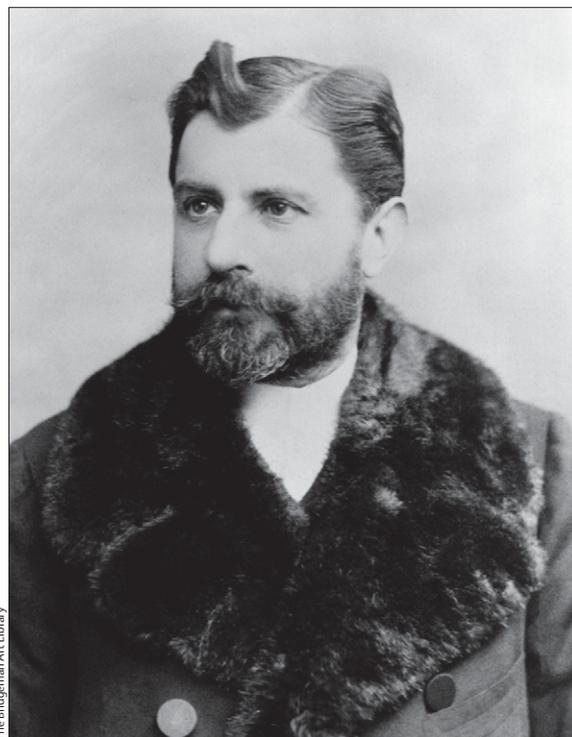
The art of medicine

Sarah Bernhardt's missing leg

In December last year, *Sud-Ouest*, a newspaper for southwest France, featured a page-one exclusive: "Sarah's leg refound!" The story referred to the "miraculous" discovery, in the basement of the Faculty of Medicine in Bordeaux, of the right leg of the actress Sarah Bernhardt, amputated by a Bordeaux surgeon in 1915. A spokesman for the Faculty quickly pointed out that "we never actually lost the leg. It was just forgotten, and now we have found it (and will) prepare it for display." There was, however, more consternation when Bernhardt historians pointed out that the specimen in formalin was a left leg, amputated below the knee, whereas Bernhardt had undergone an above-knee removal of her right limb for an excruciatingly painful arthritis of the joint.

Bernhardt, born in 1844, the daughter of a Dutch Jewish courtesan mother and an unknown father, attended convent school in Versailles and later studied at the Comédie Française. Unconventional, extravagant, emotional, she was beautiful, talented, and hard-working. Her performance in a little-known play by François Coppée, *Le passant*, at the Odéon Theatre in 1869 was her first great success.

1869 was also the year in which she met a medical student, Samuel Pozzi, then at the Paris Faculty of Medicine, in the Latin Quarter where the Odéon was situated. They became lovers, a relationship that lasted intermittently for 10 years,



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Samuel Jean Pozzi, photograph by Franz Benque

during which time Bernhardt became the first international superstar, and Pozzi became one of the most skilful and innovative surgeons in Paris. Initially absorbed in general abdominal surgery, he later turned his attention to surgery for women, becoming known as "the father of French gynaecology". He was also to become an anthropologist of note, a translator of Charles Darwin, a friend of Joseph Lister and passionate advocate of Listerism in France, a senator, writer, and collector of classical antiquities. After his marriage in 1879, the relationship with Bernhardt became a friendship that lasted until his death in 1918. More than 100 surviving letters from Bernhardt testify to the affection and respect she always held for Pozzi, whom she called Docteur Dieu—Doctor God, and on whom she always relied for advice about her own health and that of her family and friends.

So it was to Pozzi that Bernhardt turned when the pain in her leg became unbearable. The problem seemed to have begun when as Tosca, in Victorien Sardou's play of that name that later became a Puccini opera, she had to leap in the final scene from the ramparts of the Castel Sant'Angelo. Pozzi had previously operated on Bernhardt in 1898 when she was diagnosed with an ovarian cyst at her insistence. Pozzi agreed, but he clearly found the experience stressful. The day after the procedure he wrote to a friend:

"Sarah is convalescing well, cutting corners as usual. Decisive, courageous, firm and obedient...she will recover more quickly than most. Having played every other role, from Phaedra to Joan of Arc, she wished also to play the role of surgical patient, which she has done to perfection! Her cyst was no common one—elegant, deep-seated, with numerous extensions into the broad ligament, from where I had to dig them out (excuse the vocabulary!)—it was quite a struggle. The cyst was the size of the head of a fourteen year old child. What a relief to have it done! I felt as 'delivered', as operated upon, as my dear friend. But in six weeks she will be on stage again."

As the pain in Bernhardt's knee worsened in mid-1914, her friend, painter Georges Clairin, wrote to Pozzi: "She cannot walk as far as the postbox...she has to be supported to the chaise-longue...she talks of an operation and a false leg." Bernhardt was 71 years old and had chronic glomerulonephritis; Pozzi was reluctant to recommend surgery. He proposed a plaster cast for 6 months in the hope that the injured joint would ankylose. Later that year, Bernhardt moved, at the insistence of Pozzi and of Georges Clemenceau, soon to be Prime Minister of France, to a villa outside Bordeaux. Clemenceau was anxious that this "national treasure" not be captured if Paris fell to German forces. Pozzi himself, having served in the Franco-Prussian War, had rejoined the army at the age of 68 years as a military

surgeon in Paris. He dispatched Bernhardt's radiographs and a letter to his former intern, Jean Denucé, now professor of surgery in Bordeaux. On Jan 31, 1915, Denucé, submitting to Bernhardt's pleas, removed the plaster, revealing a knee swollen to twice the size of the left, and of which "the least movement brought forth a cry of agony from the brave patient". A careful examination led Denucé to a diagnosis of tuberculous osteoarthritis of the joint. He wrote to Pozzi: "My dear Master, I don't want to make any decision without knowing what you think and I await your response." Meanwhile Bernhardt had also written: "Much-loved friend, I am suffering as much after six months of total immobilisation as I was suffering before. So listen to me...I beg you to cut off the leg a bit above the knee... Don't argue...I have perhaps ten or fifteen years to live, why condemn me to suffering another fifteen years? With a wooden leg I will be able to recite, maybe even perform..."

Telegrams flew between Paris and Bordeaux. Pozzi was reluctant to operate himself on his old friend and could only leave his military duties briefly. On Feb 22, 1915, Bernhardt was wheeled past her anxious family, "with mock bravado humming the opening bars of the *Marseillaise*". One of the first women doctors in France, Mademoiselle Coingt, used the "latest novelty", the Ombrédanne mask, to administer ether; later she wrote that "in the same voice I had heard in *Tosca* and *The Lady of the Camellias* Bernhardt said to me 'Mademoiselle, I'm in your hands...let's go, quickly, quickly.' And to Denucé she said, 'Darling, give me a kiss!' I felt I was at the theatre except I myself had a role in the painful drama!" Denucé applied a tourniquet, and within 15 minutes had completed an above-knee amputation with anterior flap, with minimal blood loss.

The leg was conveyed to the Faculty for pathological examination. "Carious bone, fresh necrosis, numerous areas of caseation: tuberculosis of the joint, amputation fully justified" was the pathologist's conclusion. Clinical examination revealed no sign of tuberculosis elsewhere. Bernhardt's postoperative course was unremarkable and she was allowed home on March 10, since as Denucé wrote, "I cannot persuade Madame Bernhardt to stay longer!" Pozzi was able to make a brief visit 2 days later (though he neglected to tell her that he had been with Denucé to view the specimen at the Faculty.) She was overjoyed to see him, and in April, when she was jumping about on her left leg, wrote to him thanking him for his care of her: "My Doctor God...no being is more dear to me than you...I love you tenderly, infinitely...with feelings greater than friendship, more divine than romantic love."

Within months, Bernhardt was hard at work, devoting much of her time to war efforts. A passionate French patriot, she had established a hospital at the Odéon during the Franco-Prussian War. Faced with the reality of a cumbersome wooden leg, she opted instead for a gilded litter with horizontal shafts, in the style of Louis XV, carried by two



Sarah Bernhardt in the Trees by Georges Clairin

porters; occasionally she used a wheelchair. She went as close to the front as she was allowed, reciting stirring pieces to troops in barns and ruined villages. A fellow performer from the Comédie Française wrote of one performance, when "the flimsy curtain fluttered open to reveal a wisp of an aging woman propped...in a shabby armchair". Then the "wisp" began her lines and "The miracle took place...Sarah, old, mutilated, once more illuminated a crowd by the rays of her genius...when she wound up her recitation two thousand men rose to their feet cheering...she is greater perhaps in this glowing twilight than in the sparkling days of her apogee."

In 1916, Bernhardt toured the USA, and was described as "the head and heart of France" by the American media. She was delighted when the USA entered the war in 1917, returning to France on Armistice Day in 1918. To her great distress, however, her Doctor God was no more. Pozzi had been murdered by a deranged patient in June of that year and she had not been able to attend his funeral procession, which was followed by thousands through the streets of Paris. Bernhardt herself died in 1923, performing almost until her last breath. 30 000 people filed past her coffin to pay their respects. She is buried in Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, beneath the single word Bernhardt. Minus her right leg—its whereabouts still unknown.

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Further reading

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