

# VISITORS WITH “AN UNUSUAL CHARM”: FRENCH CELEBRITIES AT THE AUSTRALIA HOTEL, 1891–1932<sup>1</sup>

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The youngest of nations in culture,  
Her youth gives full strength to admire,  
If not with the Old World's fine fancy,  
Yet at least with real fervour and fire.

*Illustrated Sydney News*, 6 June 1891<sup>2</sup>

Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney's largest and most splendidly gilded playhouse, was a little less than four years old when Sydneysiders in evening dress packed its doors at 7.45 pm on Wednesday 8 July 1891 to see the first appearance on stage of the great Madame Sarah Bernhardt. It was a fitting venue for the most famous and adored actress in the world at the time. That afternoon, after travelling the long journey by train from Melbourne to Redfern Station, the “divine” Sarah, the flamboyant, globe-trotting French star, together with her elaborate entourage, had booked in to stay at the newly built Australia Hotel as its very first registered guests. A patient crowd of hundreds of fans was waiting outside to welcome her to Sydney. For the hotel's management the arrival of the diva was a magnificent triumph. Almost single-handedly Bernhardt established its reputation as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, grand hotel suitable for travelling international celebrities of the highest calibre. And such it became.

Staying at the Australia Hotel allowed the actress to keep herself prominently in the public eye in and around Martin Place, and provided the diva of drama with a convenient central venue from which to perform her by then famous publicity stunts to successfully promote the evening's theatrical experience. There at the newly built and luxuriously appointed hotel she and her retinue of five attendants occupied an eight-room suite on the second floor which took up the whole front of the building overlooking Castlereagh Street. The rooms were filled with imitation Louis XIV-style furniture, deep piled carpet and rich hangings. There were a connecting drawing room and dining room, two bedrooms for Bernhardt and her chief attendant, Mademoiselle Seylor, and four other rooms for the other members of her entourage.

Bernhardt's departure to the theatre each evening was a carefully conceived public event of considerable flair, with the diva stylishly dressed in full evening gown. She walked majestically down the hotel's front steps into the lighted street through the beautiful Italian Renaissance doorways as befitted a great classical actress and beauty, although by this time she was forty-seven years of age, expertly and heavily made-up. She was preceded by her dresser, who ceremoniously carried the jewel box. Her handsome leading actor in evening suit and top hat followed next with her assistant dresser. Together they paraded down the street to the nearby theatre. Her return after the performance was similarly theatrical. On entering the hotel the assistant with the jewel case turned to the right where the uniformed custodian of the hotel's safe waited to lock it away until the next evening. Madame and her remaining attendants strode to the elevator and proceeded to their suite.<sup>3</sup> It was a clever promotional stunt for both the hotel and its redoubtable guest. The most elegant hotel in the land thus gained fame far and wide, becoming "the yardstick by which all others were measured".<sup>4</sup>

All Sarah Bernhardt's performances at Her Majesty's Theatre were in French. Bilingual editions of the plays were specially produced for the Grand World Tour, so that when, in the role of Joan of Arc, the actress spoke her lines, the audience could follow either the French verse or the English translation:

Dieu me veuille garder de vous déplaire en rien.  
 Mais est-il donc contraire aux devoirs du chrétien  
 Qu'oubliant son rouet damoiselle ou bergère  
 Aux maux de son pays ne soit pas étrangère,  
 Que son âme s'indigne aux excès du vainqueur,  
 Et qu'elle ait ce doux nom de France dans le cœur?

May Heaven defend, I should displease my sire,  
 But why should it arouse your burning ire,  
 In what does it oppose the Christian faith,  
 That e'en a maiden should her country's skaith  
 Repine, and hate the foreign foes' advance  
 And hold within her heart her well loved France.<sup>5</sup>

During her residency at the Australia Hotel, such was the enthusiasm for Bernhardt that the ornate colonnade onto which her suite opened became a virtual menagerie of Australian caged animals, including brilliantly coloured parrots, koalas and possums, that continued to arrive as gifts from her adoring male fans. When she left the hotel, and Sydney, on 11 August, a huge crowd was there to see her off.

It needs to be emphasized that the diva's stay in Sydney was one of the longest of all the stopping places of her entire Grand World Tours of 1891–1893, slightly longer than the New York stay and only rivalled by those in Rio de Janeiro and London. All the rest in Europe, America and Russia were shorter in duration. Her repertoire in Sydney was exhaustively extensive—*Camille*, *La Tosca*, *Fedora*, *Cleopatra*, *Frou-Frou*, *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Pauline Blanchard*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and *Theodora*.<sup>6</sup> She played the lead role in all and was on stage nearly all the time. No other actor in Sydney to the present day has equalled this record over five and a half weeks: no wonder her record remains unequalled. On her final day in Sydney as a performer she played both *Fedora* at the matinee and *Camille* in the evening to packed and excited audiences. She saw her stay in Australia as “une apothéose”!<sup>7</sup> (Despite this, a French biography written in 1961 makes very little of Bernhardt's grand tour, while another in English published in 1967 mentions Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney only as part of her itinerary, adding no other detail.<sup>8</sup>) It was mentioned by Sarah herself (as portrayed by Fanny Ardant) in John Murrell's play, *Sarah*, performed in French in September 2002 at the Théâtre Edouard VII in Paris. The play depicts Sarah in the final summer of her life dictating the continuation of her memoirs to her faithful and long-suffering secretary, Georges Pitou.

Prominent people continued to come and go and the Australia prospered mightily through the years. During its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s the establishment enjoyed the polite exclusiveness and sophistication of the grand cosmopolitan hotels of Europe, such as those in Paris and Berlin. It catered for an Australian and international cultural and social elite, and only the upper echelons passed through its doors. Like Sarah Bernhardt, the European stars of concert hall and stage, including French celebrities, all stayed there on their Australian tours.

The Australia became the glittering scene of distinguished social gatherings and functions where “perfection in cuisine” was expected and the reigning chef produced “triumphs of the culinary art, tempting the most epicurean palate”.<sup>9</sup> Very much in evidence were the beauty, wealth, fashion and luminary talent of both the local and the international scene. And from

the beginning, with Bernhardt's memorable stay, all things French remained fashionable at the Australia Hotel.

The chef who reigned over such gatherings in the 1920s was a renowned Frenchman, Guillaume Guillou. Others of his nationality were among the fifty cooks under his charge. Guillou was appointed to the Australia Hotel with outstanding references, and after wide and successful experiences in notable and top-flight grand hotel kitchens, including the Savoy and the Cecil in London and the Continental and the Marguery—famous for its Sole Marguery—in Paris. As well as its chef, the Australia's kitchen was considered unrivalled in the Southern Hemisphere in equipment, layout and efficiency.

Amongst many delightful French-inspired dishes, the Australia boasted the best Chicken Maryland in the entire grand hotel world.<sup>10</sup> The fashionable American dish, produced by a French chef of high distinction such as Guillou, remained on the hotel's menu from the early 1920s with the influence of the American Jazz Age until its closure on 30 June 1970 when the demolition hammers were poised. Of course, Guillou was able to offer the *cordons bleu* of his national origins as well.

On 29 March 1923 all of Paris came to a halt, mourning the death of Sarah Bernhardt at the age of seventy-eight. Many of the older employees at the Australia, who had vivid memories of her stay there, also mourned her passing. Over the years newspaper and magazine articles continued to recall her famous visit in Sydney in 1891. Rapidly it became a legendary narrative of public events of a startling nature. As such, the reminiscences continued to enhance the hotel's cosmopolitan reputation amongst both Sydneysiders and overseas visitors.

Many eminent and distinguished French guests, who arrived regularly on luxury liners, were received at the Australia in Sydney in the 1920s. *L'Entente Cordiale* received extra fillip with the arrival of the popular author Pierre Benoit in 1928, then at the height of his fame. Several of his works had been translated into English and were very fashionable. Some were adapted for the silent screen. One of his best known, *L'Atlantide* (translated into English as *The Queen of Atlantis*), was filmed on location and screened in Sydney under the less romantic title of *Missing Husbands*. The reporter writing in *The Australia Handbook*, the hotel's elegant quarterly journal, pointed out that Pierre Benoit had "a wonderful imagination and descriptive power".<sup>11</sup> *La Châtelaine du Liban* was another work of notable success, and *La Chaussée des géants* threw interesting light on the so-called Irish question from a Frenchman's viewpoint. Benoit was staying at the hotel

while on a world tour and was accompanied by his wife. When he was asked by the hotel reporter whether he was writing another book, he answered emphatically but laughingly: "*Non, non, je suis en vacances*". He then admitted that he might find inspiration for something in the future. He did not speak English, but his "pretty wife" did, claiming that he spoke "*pas un mot*, so it is necessary when we are out of France, that I should translate for him everywhere". The reporter claimed that Madame spoke English very well.

The same reporter considered that Benoit had a "personality of particular charm":

He is a good-looking man, with a fine head of unusual proportions, and he has all the polished manners and traditional grace of his countrymen<sup>12</sup>

and so he was portrayed as an ideal stereotype for the benefit of Sydney readers interested in such characteristics. Benoit, who was delighted with Australia and its people, proceeded to say that before the Great War little was known of Australia in France, "*mais pendant la guerre, nous avons pu apprécier les Australiens et nous les aimons; ils étaient très populaires, parce qu'ils étaient si bienveillants, si communicatifs*".<sup>13</sup> Benoit was a close personal friend of other popular authors who lived in France, Somerset Maugham and the late Blasco Ibanez. He was well acquainted with the famous French politician, Clemenceau, whose home was opposite his in the rue Franklin in Paris.<sup>14</sup>

At the time of his visit Pierre Benoit's books were prominently on display as "Books of the Hour" on the hotel's bookstall in the main vestibule. The motto of the bookstall was from Cicero: "To add a library to a house is to give that house a soul". Denizens of the hotel, both overseas and domestic, could find there an "attractive array of literature and fiction, books of travel, memoirs, etc". As well there was a fine selection of prints of etchings and paintings by well-known Australian artists. Every month or so a new list of fiction and general literature was issued. Besides Australian, American and English writers, French authors apart from Benoit appeared regularly on the list. These included André Gide, André Maurois, Albert Cohen, Julien Green and François Mauriac. While most titles of French origin were in translation, some were in French, which suggests that several clients of the hotel were conversant with the language.

Reviews of the literature offered featured regularly in the hotel's *Handbook*, intended for light reading by its clients. Among the reviews was the novel in French by the locally based expatriate writer, Paul Wenz, *Le Jardin des coraux*,<sup>15</sup> set on Australia's famous Great Barrier Reef and in contemporary Sydney around Rose Bay. The reviewer was clearly impressed:

A graceful simplicity, both in style and narrative, characterises Mr Wenz's work, and his latest book, a story telling of a boy and girl friendship, which ripened into romance and culminated in tragedy, exemplifies this. The scene is laid in Australia and the author depicts local atmosphere with skill. The book is thoroughly Australian and this is all the more striking because the story is written in French.<sup>16</sup>

Wenz wrote all of his works in French, apart from one, *Diary of a New Chum* published in Melbourne in 1908, while he was a long-term resident in Australia. In 1897 he had settled on a station on the Lachlan River at Nanima, between Forbes and Cowra. He conveyed knowledge of Australia to the French through his fiction published in France, but he also had a substantial readership in Australia, as his books were readily available, especially in Sydney. Exotic locations like the Barrier Reef and the harbour-side suburb of Rose Bay helped to make Australia attractive to French tourists.

At the same time as Benoit and his wife were guests of the Australia Hotel, there were three famous French tennis players staying there: Jean Borotra, Jacques Brugnon and Christian Bousus, all members of their nation's tennis squad. The presence of these three French champions was the "most important event of the year in sporting circles". "The flutter created in the world of tennis" in Sydney "far outshone that of the Davis Cup, when it was played here some years ago". The French sportsmen had "hastily" brushed up on what little English they knew to enable them to receive guests, including reporters from the sporting newspapers, and entertain them at the hotel.<sup>17</sup>

Their performance on the court endeared them to the Australian public and, in a country with a strong sporting ethos, they were warmly welcomed as men who played the game in every sense. Not only were they exceptionally good at tennis, they also exhibited "magnificent sportsmanship". The friendly relations that had been established under the "grave conditions" of the Great War were thus considerably further enhanced under the happier conditions of sporting competitions.<sup>18</sup>

Jean Borotra was the foremost player of the trio—"an outstanding figure" with "an unusually charming personality, gracious courtesy and an unerring sense of fair play". He was a tall, slim athlete, full of verve and dynamic action on the tennis court, but "reposeful in private life". While at the Australia he showed a keen interest in everything—a "*joie de vivre*" and a "refreshing alertness". He was well-educated, having made a study of the classics. Engineering was his profession, but he had also studied law and could speak English, German and Spanish—culturally a man for all seasons. This is how the hotel reporter described their conversation on "the subject of wines":

At the time of our chat M. Borotra was partaking of *petit déjeuner* and eating Australian grapes with obvious enjoyment. "I like your wines", he said, "they are very good. I am sending home a lot to my friends in France and Germany. The wines are a trifle young, but they perhaps only want to be a little older to be very great".<sup>19</sup>

After the breakfast and the interview, Borotra as a man of "restless energy" found that a deluge of activities—a combination of business, social and tennis engagements with the prominent elite of Sydney—descended upon him for the day.

Carlo Liten, the supreme French-speaking Belgian tragedian, performed publicly in Sydney in solo performances at the Town Hall and delighted appreciative audiences with his finished artistry as an actor. His programme was chosen with "discernment" and included the finest works of the French and Belgian poets—Villon, Racine, Musset, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Samain, Maeterlinck, Maria Biermé, Paul Berlier, Rodenbach and Verhaeren. It was said that his art was "richly descriptive, full of light and shade, intensely profoundly tragic, delicately, exquisitely beautiful or humorously whimsical in turn". His diction was considered flawless and his voice and gestures wonderfully expressive. He was favourably compared with the great English tragedian, Henry Irving.

As a celebrity on tour, Liten naturally stayed at the Australia Hotel. The *Australia* reporter considered him to be of "extraordinarily keen intelligence", with "great charm of manner" and an attractive personality. He left a profound impression on all who met him. Liten was a cosmopolitan traveller and the countries he covered included those profoundly influenced by French colonialism and culture—Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Morocco and the French Congo. His tours had taken him

to China where he had performed at Franco-Chinese universities. He had also been to Iceland,<sup>20</sup> and had found audiences in all sorts of remote areas of the world.

Carlo Liten was a great friend of the Belgian poet, Emile Verhaeren, and took this writer's play, *Le Cloître*, successfully to Paris and London with his own company at the height of the War in 1916. He had also given a number of recitals accompanied by world-renowned orchestras. Elgar composed special music for a series of Camaerts' poems. In London Liten had been accompanied by the London Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Sir Thomas Beecham and in America by the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. The French-speaking star took Sydney by storm in a solo performance of French verse.

The summer concerts of Sydney brought Mademoiselle Françoise Mores to the Australia Hotel in January 1932. She was a distinguished French violinist who captivated her audiences in two recitals at the Sydney Conservatorium with her "exquisite artistry". She produced "suave rich" tones from her Gagliano with "facile" technique backed by "fine interpretive powers". Moreover, our *Australia* reporter noticed that she was youthful, "slender, dark-eyed", with "clear cut features" and a "charming smile" that pleased both "the eye and the heart". The old and new masters alternated in her performance repertoire: Bach, Schumann, Chopin, César Franck, Debussy, de Falla and Ravel. Her finished artistry was such that it was noted that Australians looked for a return of this violinist after "too brief a season".<sup>21</sup>

Françoise Mores was born in the northern French city of Lille and trained in Paris under Lucienne Capet and Jules Boucherit. She came from a distinguished musical family, her uncle being Henry Rabaud, the composer of *Marouf*. Her historic home in Paris in the rue de Seine once housed Marguerite de Navarre and was said to contain rare old furniture and tapestries. Mademoiselle Mores had a quick sense of humour and a zest for walking, sight-seeing and dancing. Again, as with the other French celebrities, Australia was captivated by her charm.

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Such was the transportation of French culture to Sydney, Australia, in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth. And the Australia Hotel was the epicentre of it all, with its French-inspired cuisine and ambience.

From the time of Bernhardt's visit, French-influenced aspects of culture never went out of fashion amongst Sydney's elite. There were well-educated audiences always readily available to applaud. All of Bernhardt's considerable repertoire was performed in French in July and August 1891. In 1932 Carlo Liten delighted audiences with his dramatized readings of poetry in French at the Sydney Town Hall. Some of the audience was, of course, from the local French community of Sydney, but many were Australian-born who studied French language and culture either at high school or college or at the University of Sydney. In a complex metropolis there was much interest in theatre, art, music and literature. Paris was a magnet to many, but Paris was able at times to come to Sydney where there was a serious level of appreciation of both the French language and French art forms. Local audiences were indeed culturally refined and articulate. They were able to appreciate concert and stage performances that presented works such as those by Debussy, Ravel, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Maeterlinck—music, poetry, drama, melodrama and comedy in such plays as *La Dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils, *Jeanne d'Arc* by Jules Barbier, and *La Tosca* and *Cléopatra* by Victorien Sardou.

There was clearly a Sydney public that read European literature not only in translation but also in the original, and these were supplied by sophisticated bookshops in the city such as the bookstall in the Australia Hotel. This ever-growing, cosmopolitan European culture was linked to the regular arrival and departure of luxury liners that promoted tourism in Oceania, including Australia, carrying overseas celebrities who required elite grand hotel style accommodation and extensive media publicity to complete their experience.

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#### Notes

1. This article is partly based on a paper entitled "Dining and Wining at the Grand Hotel of the Pacific: the Heyday of Elite Cosmopolitan Life at the Australia Hotel, Sydney, 1925-1945", presented by the authors at the 15th Symposium of CORAIL ("Coordination pour l'Océanie des Recherches sur les Arts, les Idées et les Littératures") held at the University of New Caledonia, Noumea, 28-30 November 2002. The text of the full paper will be published in the conference proceedings, *Les Vivres et le vivre en Océanie*.

2. Cited in *Portrait(s) de Sarah Bernhardt*, sous la direction de Noëlle Guibert, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2000, p. 165.
3. W. J. Napier, "Nobilities of the Nineties. Some Old-Time Reminiscences", *The Australia Handbook*, October 1932, pp. 13-14.
4. Peter Spearritt, *Sydney Since the Twenties*, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1978, p. 79.
5. *Jeanne d'Arc*, The Bernhardt Edition ("The only correct version of my plays translated and printed from my prompt books", signed Sarah Bernhardt 1891), Sydney, Mitchell Library Archives, p. 3.
6. Corille Fraser, *Come to Dazzle: Sarah Bernhardt's Australian Tour*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1998, p. 346.
7. *Portrait(s)*, p. 16.
8. André Castelot, *Sarah Bernhardt*, Paris, Le Livre Contemporain, 1961; Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, Bath, Cedric Chivers Ltd, 1973 (first published in 1967).
9. "The Dining Room", *The Australia Handbook*, August 1928.
10. "The Australia's Cuisine", *The Australia Handbook*, July 1937.
11. "Interesting Visitors at the Australia. Pierre Benoit", *The Australia Handbook*, Easter 1928, p. 9.
12. Loc. cit.
13. Loc. cit. The original as printed in *The Australia Handbook* has no accents.
14. Loc. cit.
15. Paul Wenz, *Le Jardin des coraux*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1929.
16. *The Australia Handbook*, 1929.
17. "Interesting Visitors at the Australia. Jean Borotra, Jacques Brugnon & Christian Boussus", *The Australia Handbook*, Easter 1928, pp. 13, 45.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. "Notable Visitors in Australia. Mademoiselle Françoise Mores", *The Australia Handbook*, March 1932, p. 14.