

Introduction

Three Transnational Trailblazers

More than a century after the French actresses Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), Réjane (Gabrielle Charlotte Réju, 1856–1920), and Mistinguett (Jeanne Florentine Bourgeois, 1875–1956) consolidated their theatrical renown by appearing in silent films, attention is newly focusing on their contributions to the early film industry. These actresses were leading stage performers, as well as international businesswomen and creative entrepreneurs. They helped grow mass audiences for cinema, while expanding the international reach of French theater through their pioneering involvement with film. This study explores the emergence of their reputations as movers and shakers in England and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their border crossings from Paris into England and America and their renown across live stage performances and early film helped each actress to become a cultural beacon and global theatrical leader in the transitional decades of the two centuries. As we will see, the accomplishments of this trio helped to ensure that ties between countries, continents, and cultures were developed and even strengthened in these pivotal years of change.

The actresses I explore shared transnational theatrical acclaim. They also all emerged from a shared, marginalized background on the cultural (and at times geographic) periphery of Paris. Emerging from lower social classes that did not claim economic, political, or cultural power in France, they became successful by defying and breaking free of social, cultural, artistic, and gendered expectations and norms. Sarah Bernhardt was the daughter of a Jewish courtesan; she chose to leave the prestigious Comédie-Française and the Odéon Theatre to forge a new career with a company of her own. Adopting the lead part in famous French roles (Phèdre, Doña Sol, Marguerite Gautier), she also commissioned spectacular

historical plays (*La Tosca*, *L'Aiglon*) and, in this way, defined contemporary tragic theater for international audiences.

Réjane and Mistinguett also emerged from the margins of Paris to enjoy theatrical success abroad. Their careers were, however, widely divergent. Réjane established prominence in the legitimate comic theaters of Paris (in the Théâtre des Variétés and the Théâtre du Vaudeville). During her rise to renown at the Théâtre du Vaudeville, Réjane worked with her husband, Paul Porel, a respected theatrical manager and director who had enjoyed success as an actor and then director of the Odéon Theatre. Réjane excelled in roles that used physical play to caustically expose class and sexual differences (most notably, in Henri Mielhac's *Ma Cousine* and Victorien Sardou and Émile Moreau's *Madame Sans-Gêne*). Celebrated as a trailblazing comic actress in London, Réjane never achieved Bernhardt's American success. In the New World, the nuance of her spoken French was considered too difficult to understand, her performance was seen as unacceptably risqué, and her works were too morally outrageous for female and family audience members to enjoy.

Mistinguett is the youngest and most "cinematic" of my three chosen case studies. She established herself in the popular Casino de Paris, the Moulin Rouge, and the Folies-Bergère—the very theaters that featured the sexualized, popular performances that Réjane was famous for satirizing in her comedies. Eventually also working her way into legitimate comic theaters such as the Gymnase Theatre and the Ambigu Theatre in Paris, Mistinguett was quite different from her compatriots. She did not regularly tour abroad, remaining largely within Paris. Here, she performed song and dance acts that were built into spectacular revues that were famous for incarnating the joyous abandon of *la ville lumière*. The acclaim of these ephemeral and changing variety spectacles enabled Mistinguett to gain coverage in English and American newspaper reports. Later, she consolidated international success through her wide-ranging work in silent films.

This trio helped change the relationship between the late nineteenth-century French stage, the emerging film industries, and English-speaking audiences in England and North America. In this respect, Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett are more than case studies because they reveal the importance of the French actress at a point in which the Old World of Europe was giving way to the dominance of the New World of America. An identifiable yet adaptable figure, the actress helped facilitate border crossings through geographical space, cultural spheres, and class divisions, as well as through the interconnected and rapidly changing media landscapes of her time. Charting transnational performance histories, my study follows each actress as she moved from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth and from Paris to England and then on to America. My aim is to refute the bias that has removed the late nineteenth-century actress from the cinematic century that was to emerge and to give evidence of the cultural clout that actresses enjoyed with English-speaking publics abroad.

THE ACTRESS AS TRANSNATIONAL PIONEER

Although I explore just three Parisian actresses, my overarching contention is that the French actress has been historically overlooked in the flourishing film industries of early twentieth-century England and America. If the French actress is considered in discussions of media industries, film history, or creative entrepreneurship today, it is within the context of celebrity studies or as a grounding figure in debates about American twentieth-century feminist performance practices. Rarely is discussion of an actress's theatrical success joined to a discussion of the galvanizing impact her work had on early film, particularly in relation to attracting popular audiences to the cinema in England and America. The actress's theatrical professionalism and business nous is also rarely offered as an explanation for international renown. In my view, although Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett's achievements emerged on the stage—where they performed in French yet still engaged the enthusiasm of English-speaking publics—they also drew these foreign audiences to film. Their international success is not so much lost to history as it is hiding in plain sight.

Jane Gaines uses the phrase “lost in plain sight” in the introduction to her book *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* Gaines employs the phrase to highlight the invisibility of female achievement in early film and (in particular) to highlight the film actress's contradictory and ironic invisibility. As she explains, “Pearl White” (an American actress celebrated for her stunt and action work in serial films in the teens) was preceded and followed by the stage and screen work of French, Indian, Chinese, and US actresses. Urging us to consider these lost histories of female performance, Gaines states: “One high-circulation female image stands for—but also stands in the way of—many others who, in a sense, underwrote the first one.”¹

I face a similar conundrum, complicated further by the fact that my high-circulation female images (“Bernhardt,” “Mistinguett”) loom as theatrical and revue celebrities, not as cinematic stars. I demonstrate that Bernhardt's involvement with the French theater informed the range of her work abroad. Although Réjane and Mistinguett did not achieve Bernhardt's celebrity (and so illustrate Gaines's point about female histories being lost in the shadow of a single star), Mistinguett's music-hall fame has eclipsed discussion of her involvement in early film. As I explain, however, the French film industry dominated global markets in the pre-World War I period. Only after this period could America claim to represent the cinematic culture of the twentieth century, and even then, this dominance was merely a conjecture (or a possibility) during the period under discussion. As Stéphanie Salmon explains in *Pathé, À la conquête du cinéma, 1896–1929*, the Pathé-Frères company was the leading film company in the world prior to the First World War, thanks to the business acumen and entrepreneurial ambition of the Pathé brothers. Working with a talented network of French financiers and industrialists,

Pathé made French silent film a global, prestige brand.² The films that Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett made in the period leading into the war were largely produced by Pathé-Frères or its affiliate companies (Le Film d'Art, La Société cinématographique des auteurs et gens de lettres [SCAGL]). Pathé's distribution networks, expanding across England and America in the teens, ensured global audiences for the actresses' films.

Contextualizing the tremendous impact of this cultural expansion through film, Richard Abel explains that French film was so available, and such an important part of American popular entertainment in the early years of film's emergence, that it is difficult to maintain distinctions between early French and early American cinema. In *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910* he asks, “Can anyone writing about the cinema's emergence in the United States, especially before 1910, ignore the fact that French films dominated the American market and so determined, in part, what would become an ‘American’ cinema?”³ I contend, in turn, that the French stage actress, because of her involvement with the Pathé company (and its affiliated distribution and exhibition networks), was part of nascent film industries in England and America. Following Abel, I ask: Can anyone writing about the cinema's emergence in England and the United States, especially before the end of World War I, ignore the fact that the French actress was famous in both the English and American markets? Can we ignore the fact that she consequently helped to model and build the extraordinary global enterprise that these cinemas would become?

From a consideration of the actress and her transnational importance in the late nineteenth century, I look forward, into her involvement in French films circulating transnationally in the teens. I am not alone in proposing that the nineteenth-century French stage actress was financially and culturally astute in recognizing film as an opportunity and resource. In his article “Conversions and Convergences: Sarah Bernhardt in the Era of Technological Reproducibility, 1911–1913,” Charles Musser explains that Bernhardt's work in the 1910–13 period capitalized on the opportunities that mechanical reproduction enabled. Musser states that Bernhardt “mobilized interrelationships and convergences among cultural forms that had certainly existed, but not in that way or to that degree.”⁴ Musser's focus is a brief period of crossover between Bernhardt on the live stage and the reproductive media of the phonograph and film. This study amplifies and develops his argument. I demonstrate that Bernhardt's commercial and cultural convergences were initiated decades earlier, when she toured abroad on the transnational stage. I further argue that even into the First World War, Bernhardt continued to develop and capitalize on her work in film. She did not see film as a medium that replaced the theater but one that existed alongside it, expanding its reach and developing new and changing relationships to audiences across the globe.

I develop Musser's focus on technological reproducibility because I also consider Bernhardt's achievements alongside a consideration of the achievements

of Réjane and Mistinguett. My argument hinges on the generational impact that these actresses enjoyed in a period in which the French actress (and, with her, the French theater) was prime among global arts and cultural industries. If we return to the 1880s—to the formative decades of the French actress's emergence as a global star—and examine the actors who worked on stage and screen through to 1918 (that is, to the end of the First World War), then these three actresses can be identified as leaders of a largely matriarchal generation of celebrity performers. Together, these performers helped develop the commercial reach and cultural impact of French culture abroad. Even into the war years, when the exuberance of the Belle Époque had expired, Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett continued to make films and to draw audiences in England and America. As I argue, the late nineteenth-century French actress did not disappear with the onset of World War I; she was not immediately replaced by younger, born-nitrate American performers. Rather, in the transitional war years, Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett commercialized the theater anew, instrumentalizing film as an international tool of French propaganda and military diplomacy.

HEROINES OF THE AMERICAN STAGE: LES PARISIENNES

The significance of the French actress in turn-of-the-century Paris was heralded through the large entryway to the international Paris Exhibition of 1900. Redirected from the Eiffel Tower—which had served as the gateway to the 1889 exhibition—the entrance to the exhibition at the opening of the twentieth century was a hundred-foot stone statue on the Champs-Élysées made by Paul Moreau-Vauthier. Instead of the expected statue of the traditional figure of Marianne, Moreau-Vauthier based his work on Bernhardt.⁵ Called *La Parisienne*, Bernhardt was not just “queen of the decorative arts” and queen of Paris but a celebrity performer whose statue rose far above the exposition, welcoming international visitors. Paris was thereby defined culturally and financially by the actress standing, as Louis Cheronnet explained, as “a sort of Queen of Queens, balancing on a ball.”⁶ At the same time, the Parisian actress was celebrated as a generational force abroad.

In his 1915 book, *The Heroines of the Modern Stage*, the American theater critic and author Forrest Izard focused on ten contemporary actresses and their achievements. At the time of his publication, just one year into World War I, most of the actresses Izard celebrated were middle-aged and still acting on the global stage. Introducing his study with five international actresses, Izard identified Bernhardt, the Polish actress Helena Modjeska, the English actress Ellen Terry, Réjane, and the Italian actress Eleonora Duse as women of particular repute. Izard then dedicated individual chapters to five American actresses: Ada Rehan (who died the following year, in 1916), Mary Anderson, Mrs. (Madden) Fiske, Julia Marlowe, and Maude Adams. Why and how did Izard choose his case studies? Explaining that all female

actresses were “modern,” in the sense that women were not traditionally permitted on the theatrical stage, Izard opened his work with the statement: “The following pages give some account of those actresses who stand out today as the most interesting to an English-speaking reader. The Continental actresses included are those *who gained international reputations and belonged to the English and American stage almost as much as to their own* [emphasis added].”⁷

Izard’s book was published as the third iteration of a new Modern Heroines book series launched by the New York publisher Sturgis and Walton in 1912. The series targeted a young female audience. As the foreword to the first *Heroines* book stated (this was *Heroines of Modern Progress*, its foreword written by Ellen M. Henrotin, the “Hon. president of General Federation of Women’s Clubs in America”), females were pioneers who broke the bonds of conventionality and actively contributed to all aspects of modern industrial life.⁸ In the preface that joined Henrotin’s inauguration of this female-focused book series, Warren Dunham Foster highlighted the importance of women in the world more generally, arguing that “modern society, to a very great extent, is a woman made society.” As Dunham explained, the target audience for his Heroines series was “the young woman of twelve to thirty years old.”⁹ Returning to Izard and the female legacy that his book proposed, we can recognize a generation of thinkers, writers, and activists in America celebrating the achievements of the theatrical actress, with Bernhardt and Réjane firmly within this fold. Significantly, and uniquely through Réjane, readers were also offered theatrical comedy—the comedy of manners, domestic comedy, and sex comedy—as an explanation for American fame. As I have mentioned, Izard’s *Heroines of the Modern Stage* came third in the Modern Heroines Series (following *Heroines of Modern Progress* and *Heroines of Modern Religion*): the actress was an international cultural beacon, unique to the twentieth century as a woman who championed both social and artistic progress.

“L’ÂGE DE LA FEMME”: THE ERA OF THE (MIDDLE-AGED) ACTRESS

In an important essay on actresses and early noncomic “first wave” film stars, British scholar Ian Christie argues that we must recognize the importance of women—particularly, the importance of French actresses—to the development of global screen industries. Tabulating the careers of the most famous twenty-two early female film stars in Europe, Christie notes that these celebrities were often “the earliest in their respective national film industries.” Listing actresses such as Gladys Sylvani and Chrissie White from Britain and Henny Porten and Lil Dagover from Germany, Christie states that France is an anomaly, “the notable exception,” since this nation boasts “three older French actresses (all already famous).” These three older actresses—Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett—are therefore quite different from “the most typically successful of the youngest cohort, those born in the

1890s . . . [who] had no stage experience at all before they were ‘discovered’ by filmmakers, and quickly recognised as favourites of the cinema-going public.”¹⁰ When France dominated world film markets in the pre-World War I period, it was its leading and established stage actresses who helped to draw audiences to the cinema.

In an article published in 1912 in *Gil Blas* entitled “L’Âge de la femme,” the age of Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett was discussed as a computational fact and as a nod to the leadership of theatrical performers in France.¹¹ While Mistinguett (unlike Bernhardt and Réjane) was still young when this article was published, in 1926 Colette published an article reflecting on the consolidation of Mistinguett’s fame during her years of physical maturity. Identifying the 1940s as a decade of particular importance for actresses in France, Colette argued that “the woman of our country [France] is not, physiologically, precocious. . . . A foreigner, who seems to know about these things, assures me that France is, *par excellence*, the country of the dangerous quadragenarian. On this account, the music hall, like the theatre, is an exceptional climate, maturing quadragenarians without end.”¹²

Although Mistinguett entered film in her early thirties, Bernhardt and Réjane were (respectively) in their early sixties and late fifties when they began acting in films. At this point, Bernhardt and Réjane were also actress-managers of their own theaters and headline performers on the variety stage in England and America. Their renown involved a process of transnational self-making through theater and film.¹³

CONSIDERING SARAH BERNHARDT’S CELEBRITY ABROAD

A study that engages a trio of leading Parisian actresses and traces their success into England and America must also engage with the issue of celebrity culture. In her book *The Drama of Celebrity*, Sharon Marcus demonstrates that celebrity emerges from a tripartite relationship between media producers, members of the public (or, rather, publics), and celebrities themselves.¹⁴ Marcus uses a wide range of sources and materials to examine these three interactive and contested entities that ground her theory of celebrity culture. Significantly, Sarah Bernhardt and her fame in America is Marcus’s central focus. Describing Bernhardt as the woman who helped to produce modern celebrity culture, Marcus’s work engages deeply with Bernhardt’s international celebrity, and it intersects richly with theater history and art history. Marcus’s work also generously reveals a wealth of primary materials—press clippings, photographs, illustrations, and historical ephemera—relating to the ever-shifting, and even at times contradictory, aspects of Bernhardt’s fame and reception abroad.

Although my study similarly draws on primary materials, it is focused on the differences between Bernhardt’s reception in England and America. I do not

mirror the temporal nor conceptual breadth of Marcus's scholarship. Rather than build links between the emergence of modern celebrity over a century ago and celebrity culture today, I focus on specific moments of transnational emergence to highlight what we can still learn from a generation of globally significant female performers. Because I am aware of the importance of film to the expansion of Bernhardt's international success, I also explain the spread and consolidation of her twentieth-century celebrity through a focus on this new media. Consequently, when I discuss Bernhardt, I differentiate her success in England from the success she enjoyed in America, I include a discussion of her involvement with the variety stage and with film, and I demonstrate the range of her pioneering work across different genres and forms of film.

Examining inaugural moments of Bernhardt's career—her first performances abroad on the legitimate stage, her first appearances on the variety stage of London and New York, her involvement with a wide range of films—I contextual national differences in the emergence and growth of her fame. While Marcus (in my view, mistakenly) claims that film scholars “assign credit to individual stars when they discuss case studies, mistakenly assigning success to a single source,” I demonstrate that work in film history is informed by the same tripartite exchange between producer, publics, and performer that she identifies in her own scholarship and that we establish difference in reception contexts.¹⁵ Moreover, I prove that Bernhardt was not, as Marcus states, “an early adopter of film, [who] also made hundreds of movies, most now lost,”¹⁶ but a creative pioneer who astutely recognized the many opportunities that film afforded. As I demonstrate, Bernhardt's involvement in film allowed her to forge new audiences and to enjoy a myriad of commercial and creative possibilities abroad. I contend that early film—ironically, overlooked in most discussions of Bernhardt's twentieth-century celebrity—helped to sustain her renown well after her death, well into the heady years of the Hollywood studio system in the mid-twentieth century. My work asks, in other words, that the longevity of Bernhardt's success be explained by the fact that early film expanded her global visibility greatly and renewed intergenerational interest in her. Finally, and more methodologically, I contend that film history's use of select case studies expand, rather than restrict, our understanding of female achievement, transnational theatrical culture, and the making of modern celebrity cultures.

Marcus is not alone in framing Bernhardt's celebrity as a mainspring for a consideration of female stardom and power at a transitional moment in cultural history. Scholarly articles and books, particularly those written by cultural feminists in the past two decades, have mined Bernhardt's life and achievements to explore the galvanizing momentum of her celebrity appeal. In *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Mary Louise Roberts explores the New Woman's challenge to what she terms “regulatory norms of gender” in fin de siècle France.¹⁷ Focusing a chapter on Bernhardt's career, Roberts argues that the actress destabilized fixed notions of womanhood. A key argument in Roberts's book is

that theatrical “acting up” cannot be dismissed as a form of social and cultural eccentricity.¹⁸ Rather, Bernhardt must be considered alongside female journalists and writers as an important prong within the multifarious emergence of the New Woman in fin de siècle Paris.

Alongside Bernhardt, Roberts examines Marguerite Durand (the founder of the female-run newspaper *La Fronde*), Séverine (the first female reporter), and Gyp (the journalist and right-wing novelist). No mention is made of film or its capacity to disseminate Bernhardt’s celebrity differently (but also synchronously) to audiences, both locally and abroad. As I have stated, however, my study focuses on Bernhardt’s disruptions in England and America. While I agree that Bernhardt’s theatrical performances challenged cultural conventions, my interest lies in Bernhardt’s capacity (and here I will use Roberts’s own metaphor) to “expose” herself through theater and film to audiences abroad. With this question of exposure in mind, I ask: What can we learn from three very different French actresses who ensured that theater and film centralized Paris as a global capital of culture?

Susan Glenn’s *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* positions Bernhardt as a New Woman whose spectacular celebrity helped audiences in America redefine feminism in the period between 1880 and 1910. Glenn’s study confirms the tremendous impact Bernhardt had on feminist performance, female celebrity, and self-driven publicity in early twentieth-century America.¹⁹ Glenn also joins the emergence of the New Woman in America to what she terms “New Journalism”—that is, the development of “journalistic spectacle that served the theatre and the press.”²⁰ Where Roberts links Bernhardt’s feminism to journalistic developments specific to France (the *frondeuses*—that is, the female staff working for *La Fronde*), Glenn sees a symbiotic relationship between the spectacle of Bernhardt on the stage and the “stunt-journalism” of the new metropolitan press in America.²¹

I similarly explore newspapers, as well as the related histories of film publicity, promotion, and management, to evidence the overlap between historically distinct fields of study. My methodology and focus is guided, however, by Richard Abel’s study *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913–1916*.²² Abel explores the myriad relationships between journalism and early film, amplifying our enmeshed understanding of popular print culture, the emergence of film criticism, fan reception, and film’s contribution to early twentieth-century American culture. Significantly, he opens new directions in feminist cultural history by identifying New Women as exemplary film writers and editors.²³ In his recent *Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take on the Movies, 1914–1923*, Abel confirms that women were authors and agents in cinema history, their journalism and editorial work helping to develop mass audiences for film, an array of lenses through which to regard film stars, and a rich language for the “new motion picture field.” Including Mae Tinée’s 1917 review of Bernhardt’s film *Mothers of France* (*Mères françaises*, Louis Mercanton and René Hervil, Éclipse,

1917)—and explaining that Tinée was the movie page editor for the *Chicago Tribune*—Abel demonstrates that Bernhardt's celebrity overlaps with new directions in film history, expanding views of American print culture, and a renewed appreciation of the gaps we still need to fill in women's history.²⁴

FILM FESTIVALS AND CELEBRITY CULTURE:
 "1910 AS THE END OF ANONYMITY"

Although my research for this book included repeated film viewings at the Archives françaises du film (Bois d'Arcy), the British Film Institute, the Cinémathèque française, and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (Melbourne and Canberra)—as well as online viewings through the Gaumont Pathé archives, the Internet Archive, personal links sent to me by archivists, and YouTube—it was at established international festivals such as Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna and Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (Pordenone Silent Film Festival) in Pordenone that I was first given access to works featuring the late nineteenth-century actress on silent film. My programming of a retrospective of Bernhardt's extant films at Cinema Ritrovato in 2006 and my recent programming with Richard Abel of a body of Mistinguett films at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (2019) allowed me to see a corpus of actress-driven films projected in a cinema surrounded by audience members and accompanied by live music.²⁵

Mariann Lewinsky's 2010 Cinema Ritrovato programming opened my eyes to the idea that French actresses can be studied collectively to illuminate new ways of thinking about film history. Providing evidence of the range and depth of Mistinguett's screen career in her "A Hundred Years Ago: European Films of 1910" program and her contemporaneous "Albert Capellani: A Cinema of Grandeur" program, Lewinsky demonstrated that the *ciné-vaudeville* of Louis Feuillade and Musidora included Mistinguett and her work with pioneering film directors Albert Capellani, Georges Denola, and Georges Monca.²⁶ In the "A Hundred Years Ago" program Lewinsky described Mistinguett as a star who generated audience engagement in film.²⁷ Relating Mistinguett's involvement in film to Pathé's 1910 opening of its Comica Studio in Nice (where celebrity series such as the *Rigadin* series emerged, drawn from the theater's most famous music-hall comics), Lewinsky argued that the traditional characterization of 1910 as the year that marks the end of the short film and the birth of the long film is artificial and incorrect. Rather, 1910 saw the emergence of the cinema star. As she explained, "Among cinema-goers' new favourites were some of the most successful stars of the Paris vaudeville stage, such as Mistinguett and Charles Prince, alias Rigadin."²⁸

It was Mistinguett appearing on film, rather than the arbitrary length of a given film, that Lewinsky considered significant to film history. She explained that "too many long films were made before 1910 and too few longer films dated 1910 are known for us to continue to assert this demarcation." The historical transition Lewinsky identified was "1910 as the end of anonymity, 1910 as the first year of

names. Name[s] of actors, names of directors. Not all made their debut in 1910—many had been in films for some time—but what was new and would remain with us was the stream of names which from now on accompanied the films. The names of 1910: Falena, Feuillade, Novelli, Bertini, Perret, Jasset, Denola, Monca, Capellani, Napierkowska, Mirval, Sylvestre, Numès, Fabre, Guillaume, Lepanto, Robinne, Delvair, Maggi, Fromet and so on, and so on, and so on.”²⁹ As Lewinsky highlighted, by 1910, actors were billed as stars on film, and directors were also beginning to be acknowledged. Of the names Lewinsky listed, Capellani, Denola, and Monca worked with Mistinguett. Between 1909 and 1913, these men made (between them) an estimated twenty-eight films featuring Mistinguett at Pathé’s SCAGL.³⁰

As I have noted, Abel and I recently curated a program of Mistinguett films at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto. Thanks to the support of festival director Jay Weissberg, we showcased a program of films focusing on Mistinguett as a standout female star working in the early French film industry. Because of the recent restoration work undertaken by the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée, our program featured two of French-Algerian director André Hugon’s works, *Chignon d’Or* (*The Gold Chignon*, Films Succès, 1916) and *Fleur de Paris* (*Flower of Paris*, Films Succès, 1916) alongside Capellani’s more familiar *L’Épouvante* and *La Glu*. I write this book still awaiting confirmation that Hugon’s 1917 *Mistinguett détective I* and *Mistinguett détective II* (Hugon and Louis Paglieri, Les Films Succès, 1917) have been similarly restored and made available for a second program of films. In consequence, I am aware that, as a film historian, I work in a field where histories are changing through restoration work in archives, coupled with initiatives in festival programming. As this study demonstrates, an ongoing, evolving, and fresh presentation of historical evidence in the film festival context invites us to insert the actress differently into celebrity histories and to propose new ways of thinking about the renown and impact that the French actress enjoyed.

THE UNIVERSAL FEMININE: THE FRENCH THEATRICAL ACTRESS ABROAD

Although theater scholars do not typically consider film history in their discussions of nineteenth-century actresses, they confirm the renown that French actresses established when they performed abroad. In *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stages of London and Paris*, Catherine Hindson explains that between the mid-1880s and 1910, actresses “rapidly became visual representations of metropolitan commodity culture: icons of their time. Simultaneously, they were creative, autonomous professional performers: products and active agents of the fin de siècle’s burgeoning entertainment industry.”³¹ Elaine Aston interprets this dual role of the actress in her article, “‘Studies in Hysteria’: Actress and Courtesan, Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs. Pat Campbell.” Here, we learn that Bernhardt was capable of reinterpreting and adapting an existing drama to suit her own celebrity performance style. Her performance of Alexander Dumas’s young courtesan

Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camélias* was at once sexual and redemptive. As Aston argues, Bernhardt's performance—characterized in terms of “a histrionic, visual ‘acting out’ of extreme feminine suffering that bore a close resemblance to the female patient as hysteric”—was understood by English audiences to represent a shared, global reference point of “the universal feminine.”³²

In John Stokes's important study *The French Actress and Her English Audience*, Bernhardt and Réjane's theatrical prowess is placed within a broader dynastic line of celebrity French actresses performing in England between the early nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth. Stokes focuses on eight French actresses: Mademoiselle Mars, Rachel Félix, Madame Plessy, Virginie Déjazet, Aimée Desclée, Réjane, Bernhardt, and Edwige Feuillère. Bernhardt and Réjane are integral to a female lineage that represents a significant “golden age of acting.” Stokes contends that the impact the French actress has exerted on English culture has been underappreciated and misconstrued. In his view, that influence was a long-lasting phenomenon that provided creative stimulus for “artists of every kind.” The French actress provoked and generated the creative work of novelists, poets, and essayists, just as she inspired comparisons between “past and present, as well as between contemporary performers . . . as one dazzling performance lit up another.” Collectively, he contends, “the French actresses constitute a myth of a golden age of acting—a myth for which we have, as Henry James might say, ‘a good deal of evidence.’”³³

Stokes takes the significant step of acknowledging the French actress as a transnational performer who inspired English audiences abroad. Stokes makes no effort, however, to include film in his discussion of the spread and consolidation of this fame. Given that Stokes identifies Réjane's Madame Sans-Gêne, the comic washerwoman in Sardou's *Madame Sans-Gêne*, as “her most celebrated and long-lived role,” this is unfortunate. Indeed, Stokes's elision of Bernhardt and Réjane's success on film—and, I would add, his elision of the London variety stage—means we are offered a very rich, but also a rather restricted, view of English audiences engaging in French performance abroad. Particularly in the case of Réjane, her link with *le peuple* “as they might be popularly imagined” is never materialized beyond the subject matter of her plays.³⁴

Similarly, theater historian Jacky Bratton does not consider early transnational film when she discusses popular theater in nineteenth-century England. Her research nevertheless reminds us that the nineteenth-century actress must be examined in an intertextual—or, in what Bratton calls an “intertheatrical”—way. In her celebrated study, *New Readings in Theatre History*, Bratton includes working women, the nonliterary, as well as the popular, as foundations for theatrical case studies. As Bratton explains, the theater playbill reveals much about the material conditions and historic practices of the theater.³⁵ My exploration of theater history follows Bratton's lead in using theater playbills, pamphlets, reviews, commemorative booklets, and posters, but I have done this to insert actress-driven histories into the discussion of early film.

ENABLING AN ACTRESS'S "CINEMATIC" CAREER

Film history has a long, complex, and changing relationship with theater history. As film historians are aware, the relationship between the two fields was determined early on by the complexities of film's emergence and integration into the arena of arts practice and criticism. From the opening decades of the twentieth century, a wide range of cultural, industrial, and critical activists waged continuing debates about film—both hostile and celebratory.³⁶ These debates explored and contested what film represented and what its relation to theater was or should be. From these widespread encounters, expressed through popular opinion and critical judgment, there arose a division between theater and film historians.

Each author, critic, historian, and activist was arguing for stakes that were intertwined with possibilities for government funding, educational recognition, and institutional acceptability. For early film critics like Vachel Lindsay and (later) Nicholas Vardac in America, as well as for the educated film enthusiasts (such as the *Close Up* people in the UK, as well as those who followed them), the struggle was to have film recognized as a separate and unique art, distinct from, not an adjunct to, theater and other performance arts. This aim became even more important for getting film into higher education in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as a distinctive discipline separate from English, theater studies, and art history. The hurdles faced by advocates for film studies included the claim of film on publishers' finances, art gallery and educational budgets, and curriculum spaces.³⁷

It was not until the 1990s that scholars began to argue passionately for a revision to our inherited theatrical bias. The theater historian David Mayer has provided an important contribution to programming in film festivals and to our understanding of the relationship between the nineteenth-century theater and early film. A leader of what might loosely be called the "post-Vardac" group of scholars, Mayer has significantly shifted how we approach considerations of the theater, and the theatrical actor, in early film.³⁸ Eric de Kuyper is also a key figure who helped shift the relationship between two previously distinct histories. With the authority and experience gained, in part, from his role as deputy director of the Dutch Film Museum, de Kuyper explained that film historians need to learn more about the popular stage of the late nineteenth century to appreciate what they see in films of the twentieth century's teen years. De Kuyper's point was that the early cinema did not struggle to free itself from the yoke of the theater but rather formed a constituent part of popular entertainment.³⁹

Heide Schlüpmann's pioneering work on early German dramatic film framed arguments about the importance of theater to early film within the context of the actress Asta Nielsen. In *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema*, Schlüpmann argued that Nielsen's playful performances influenced the development of early film and that female viewers likewise contributed as audience members to the meaning and enjoyment brought to the new medium. As Schlüpmann

explained, the social appeal that Nielsen's films offered female audience members was linked to the social and cultural versatilities that the cinema newly mobilized outside the home.⁴⁰ Other groundbreaking studies—less central to my focus on transnational film but equally important to our growing acceptance that theater history is intrinsic to film history—include James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema*, Yuri Tsivian's *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Culture Reception*, and Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs's *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*.⁴¹

On the heels of this collective work, a new generation of scholarship is developing the ways we think of convergence between the late nineteenth-century stage and early twentieth-century film. Key works include Jon Burrows's *Legitimate Cinema*, Christine Gledhill's *Reframing British Cinema, 1918–1928*, Maggie Hennefeld's *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes*, Matthew Solomon's *Disappearing Tricks*, and the far-reaching collection focusing on film and melodrama by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, *Melodrama Unbound*.⁴² Not all of these studies look specifically at practices of or performance on the live stage, not all are concerned with actresses, and none are concerned with the actress on the late nineteenth-century stage or questions of transnational cinema. Nevertheless, they are all written or edited by film scholars who bridge the gap between theater and film history and who keep a firm eye on the issue of film context (that is, on the changing historical conditions of film's emergence, reception, and circulation).

Because my study is focused on female performance cultures and practices that originated on the stage, Mary Simonson's *Body Knowledge* is particularly important. Arguing that performing women in early twentieth-century American culture reveal an intermedial aesthetics that allowed them (and audiences) "to imagine and experiment with new ways of being in the modern world," Simonson highlights interdisciplinary performance contexts, lost and overlooked female theater histories, and the importance of creative women to early twentieth-century culture. Simonson frames her research in an urgent and unequivocal way, stating that she "brings to light networks of performers who have frequently fallen through cracks of musicological narratives." Focusing on what she calls the "intermedial practices" of female performers, Simonson contends that female performers and fans experimented "with new ways of being in the modern world, both onstage and onscreen, and as economically influential 'arbiters of American taste.'" ⁴³

While Simonson's scholarship explores women in American popular culture, the work led by Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung into Asta Nielsen in their edited collection *Importing Asta Nielsen* demonstrates the global spread of the European actress through silent film, as well as the connection between the rise of an actress's fame and the introduction of new business models in the film industry. Loiperdinger and Jung state that "more than two dozen film scholars scrutinized the role Asta Nielsen films played in different film markets of various countries, in distribution and exhibition practices, in the competition between local cinemas, in the innovation in film marketing and film advertising, in short, in the establishment of a new basis for the film markets in many countries around the world."⁴⁴

Although Asta Nielsen was an actress who made her name a brand “nearly unrivalled in many countries in the years 1911 and 1912,”⁴⁵ she was not particularly successful in America. My study therefore joins Loiperdinger and Jung in focusing on the establishment of actress-driven brands abroad but departs from them in focusing on England and America. I demonstrate, for example, that the marketing of a Bernhardt film in England was different from the marketing of a Bernhardt film in America. Moreover, I explore three separate but contemporaneous celebrity careers emerging from a single capital of theater (Paris).

In *Women in the Silent Cinema*, Annette Förster contends that the consideration of an actress’s career is best understood as a “careerography.” In the same way that Shelley Stamp argues in *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* that a filmmaker’s career must be considered as “the nexus for a larger investigation,” Förster calls for the consideration of an actress’s combined career on stage and screen.⁴⁶ As Förster explains: “Careerographies’ are multilayered and interdisciplinary, as well as affirmative and non-hierarchical; they do not necessarily privilege cinema over other disciplines and media and they reflect the spirit of the times in professionalism, entrepreneurial practices and shifts within and among a range of discipline and media.”⁴⁷ Following de Kuyper, Förster argues that cinema did not struggle to set itself free from the theater. Instead, it operated in a productive and dynamic relation to it.⁴⁸

Taking three different but related case studies, Förster examines the careers of the Dutch actress Adriënné Solser, the French actress Musidora, and the Canadian actress Nell Shipman. Förster demonstrates that these actresses learned “their métier in practice” before acting in, producing, and directing film. Förster carefully contextualizes the popular theater in discussion, explaining that at the turn of the century, popular entertainment included *variété*, revue, and cabaret theaters, as well as cinema. As Förster explains, the *variété* theater—known as music hall in France, variety theater in England, vaudeville in America, and *Spezialitäten-Programm* in Germany—joined short, varied stage performances with film screenings imported from across the world. In other words, theater and film were not mutually exclusive; the theater embraced the cinema, often making it part of an evening’s entertainment.⁴⁹

CONTEXTUALIZING MY TRANSNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

Unlike Förster, I explore transnational “careerographies” developed in England and America. In my first chapter, I argue that Bernhardt’s capacity to adapt herself to shifting national theatrical environments helped establish differences between her English and American fame. By the late 1880s in London, Bernhardt was criticized for vulgarizing her acting in order to draw English crowds to London’s West End Lyceum Theatre. In America, Bernhardt was billed as a prestigious “high-class” actress who, even when later appearing in large, popular Vaudeville

forums, is discussed in terms of elevating theatrical art. These national differences were transnational divisions, specific to local audiences, communities, and cultural contexts.

National differences in marketing and interpreting Bernhardt were continued when she entered film. Her first feature film, *Queen Elizabeth* (*Les Amors de la Reine Élisabeth*, Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, Histrionic Film Company, 1912), was a respected and legitimate drama screened in prestigious theaters. When it was released, the film was considered novel in America. Women and notable local families attended screenings. This audience began, for the first time, to celebrate film as a legitimate form of entertainment, helping to make Bernhardt's film culturally respectable. In England, *Queen Elizabeth* was affectionately renamed *Queen Bess*. The film attracted middle-class audiences—again, also women and families—who celebrated its depiction of their famous national monarch as an emotional and loving woman. As the film demonstrated, Queen Bess was human; she could (and did) make professional and personal mistakes. Five years later, when Bernhardt made *Mothers of France* (in 1917), she launched one of the earliest and most successful propaganda films produced by the French government. When we consider Bernhardt's films in relation to expanding audiences for film, as well as in relation to the expanding support for participation in a global war, we understand that Bernhardt saw film as a resource, one that could claim new audiences and that opened the theater to a myriad of performance possibilities.

An absence of scholarship about Réjane, the actress I discuss in my second chapter, is linked to the comedy that she played on the stage, as well as to the difficulty in finding and watching the few films that she made. Réjane was famous for intentional, physical play; her performances focused on the comedy of domestic drama and social class. I argue that this form of comedy reminds us of the numerous ways women (particularly French actresses) chose not to fit themselves into the bedrooms and drawing rooms of upper-class, or even bourgeois, mannered society. In this context, Réjane asks that we regard her as a bridging figure, not only in the context of emerging transnational entertainment industries but as a bridge between generations of performers who ensured the visibility of feminist fun. While American audiences were not particularly enamored of Réjane, finding her choice of roles and performances morally questionable, English audiences relished her theatrical play. In my view, Réjane is an Old World (French) precursor to those many women, discussed in Maggie Hennefeld's *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film*, who use their more obvious "female slapstick corporeality" as provocation for social change.⁵⁰ During the war years, Réjane replaced this provocation with the patriotic film *Alsace* (Henri Pouctal, Film d'Art, 1915). No longer incarnating the popular humor of Paris, Réjane became a lightning rod to the changed historical, social, political, and military aims of France.

I discuss Mistinguett, my third and youngest Parisian case study, in chapter 3. A showbusiness legend affectionately known as “La Miss,” Mistinguett did not travel abroad extensively in the pre–World War I period; nevertheless, she helped Paris to consolidate its fame as the global theatrical capital of the Belle Époque. A much-commented upon contributor to the music halls and revues of Paris, Mistinguett incarnated the theatrical variety and cultural hybridity that came to characterize the city. Drawing attention to Paris as a locus of action and intrigue, Mistinguett made more than forty films between 1908 and 1917. Through film, Mistinguett circulated before audiences who could not attend her live performances and who were not, therefore, part of the tumult that characterized popular theatergoing in Paris. I demonstrate that cinema made Mistinguett a film star in England. Parisian street views, the physicalized shows of the theatrical sketch, the showcasing of nineteenth-century French literary achievements, and investigative crime fiction became shared points of cultural reference.

World War I brought a significant transformation in the global film industry. This included changes to the ways in which the transnational French actress was marketed and received by audiences abroad. As my fourth and final chapter explains, when Mistinguett’s films circulated in Britain and America during these years, they engaged viewers in a vision of France that largely predated the war: they revealed Mistinguett performing in Parisian streets; attending theaters, cafés, and houses; and visiting tourist resorts that appear untouched by the war. Although some of her films included military or espionage themes—for example, *La Double Blessure/The Temptations of Life* (Milano Films, 1915) and *Mistinguett détective I and II*—Mistinguett’s physical but lighthearted intrigues stand in stark contrast to the territorial nationalism of Réjane’s first feature film, *Alsace*, and the fervent patriotism of Bernhardt’s *Mothers of France* (1917). These two older actresses—each cast as a mother figure in their patriotic films, and each fervently promoting themselves as a transnational *porte-parole* to English-speaking audiences abroad—were lightning rods in the French effort to empathize, engage, and rouse the national fervor of mothers, lovers, sisters, and daughters in Britain and America through film. Bernhardt’s *Mothers of France*, in particular—released in America eight weeks before Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917—that demonstrates the robust networks and genuine affection that the transnational actress enjoyed in America. At an advanced stage of her career, and as an elderly performer who had suffered the amputation of one leg in 1915, Bernhardt ironically emerged as a still agile actress, cleverly using film to address British and American audiences about events as they were unfolding.

Bernhardt traveled to Britain and America during the war, becoming in each country a symbol of French courage and fortitude. Although Mistinguett did not perform abroad during the war, her series of films made during the war showcased her physical agility and focused on the themes of espionage and subterfuge. In

this way, and particularly through the series of films she made with André Hugon between 1915 and 1917, Mistinguett emerged in this transitional period as a defiantly plucky Parisienne screen actress. As my opening chapter explains, however, in the prewar period, Mistinguett formed part of a generation of groundbreaking transnational actresses active on both stage and screen, with Bernhardt at their helm. These women were ambitious in their vision and extraordinary in their achievements. They sallied forth, projecting French theater and film into new territories and new contexts.