

Alumna writes stage musical to star in



Liggett alumna Carol Dunitz (LIG '68)

If ambition is contagious, studying the life of Sarah Bernhardt is bound to make a person do something bold.

After immersing herself in the career of the French tragedienne — who was not a star but a supernova — Liggett alumna Carol Dunitz (LIG '68) last year gave up a career as an independent speechwriter and communications strategist to pursue a lifelong dream of writing and producing musicals. Her first work was a tribute to “The Divine Sarah” called “Bernhardt on Broadway,” a one-woman show starring Dunitz that has been staged across the United States and Canada since August 2010. Dunitz brought the show to the Grosse Pointe War Memorial in June and will perform the show March 6 through April 1 at Detroit’s 1515 Broadway Theater.

Dunitz, who lives in Ann Arbor, said the qualities that propelled Bernhardt to international stardom are the qualities that make her an ideal subject for a musical: unbridled ambition, unrivaled talent, and an unparalleled instinct for self-promotion.

A century before the Information Age, which has given celebrities television, Internet, Twitter, Facebook and other tools to showcase their art and image, Bernhardt used the limited resources of the day to make herself the most famous woman on the planet. She accomplished this through provocative interviews with the press and by orchestrating the spread of apocryphal stories about her eccentric lifestyle. These outrageous tales, gobbled up by eager newspaper reporters, led curious throngs on every continent to flock to her performances. But her talent and magnetism brought them back each time the tireless globetrotter returned.

“Bernhardt on Broadway” takes place on an evening in the late 1890s, when Bernhardt would have been in her mid-forties, and finds the actress alone in her parlor talking intimately to the audience about her life. Through the course of the two-hour show, during which Dunitz dons a thick French accent and elaborate costumes, Bernhardt tells colorful stories and sings 12 songs that relate her ascendancy to world acclaim, beginning with her childhood as the illegitimate daughter of a courtesan. She sings of her mastery of public relations, her need for adoration, her resilience in the face of life’s disappointments and defeats and her inimitable persona. To ensure authenticity and get closer to the truth about a woman who deliberately spread misinformation about herself, Dunitz read close to a hundred books on Bernhardt.

Dunitz, who has been writing music since she was nine, compares her work to that of old school composers such as Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. She wants audiences to leave with melodies and lyrics running through their heads, she said.

Dunitz, whose next project is a musical about Abraham Lincoln told by his wife, Mary Todd, recalls Liggett as “a very comfortable atmosphere where you were encouraged to pursue your interests.” This type of academic environment is crucial to pursuing varied interests throughout life, Dunitz said, whether or not one changes careers as she did.

“When you attend a school like Liggett,” she said, “you have the opportunity to learn about so many things so that later you have a broader base for enjoying life.”

For more information on the musical, including tour dates and locations, visit www.bernhardtonbroadway.com.



Sarah Bernhardt
circa 1890