Introduction

I am part of a cohort of women who grew up haunted by the ghost of actress Sarah Bernhardt. Among the memories of my adolescence in the early 1960s, few are more vivid than the familial response to my emotional outbursts. At those moments when both my mother and grandmother happened to be present, they would eye each other knowingly and utter in unison: "Oh, Sarah Bernhardt! There she goes again." Today, when I ask women of a certain age what the name means to them, they often tell similar stories. Typically, they recall their youthful emotional excesses would lead at least one parent to remark "Don't be such a Sarah Bernhardt!" or "Don't pull a Sarah Bernhardt." As one woman put it, "it never occurred to us that Sarah Bernhardt had long been dead. We were under the impression that she was very [much] alive, inhabiting our homes, always behind the scenes of any emotional outburst." In the folklore of her family, Bernhardt was "somewhat of a dybbuk, inhabiting our souls, controlling our behavior . . . all we had to do was rid ourselves of her."[1]

Sarah Bernhardt came to America to perform her plays for the first time in 1880 and completed her last American tour in 1918. She was seventy-eight years old when she died in Paris in 1923. These dates are significant, for it is unlikely that many of those who admonished their daughters not to be Sarah Bernhardt had themselves ever actually seen the actress perform or read the voluminous newspaper accounts of her American tours. And yet, for half a century after her death, the name and the concept "Sarah Bernhardt" remained an important form of cultural shorthand for volatile displays of female emotion.

Today these collective memories have faded. Once a household word in the United States, the actress no longer occupies a vaunted place in our cultural imagination.[2] It may be that at the turn of the twenty-first century, when women take up a relatively large amount of social and

cultural space, it is no longer appropriate to ask them to make their personal dramas less conspicuous. Then too the older generation, those who remembered Bernhardt and kept her image alive, no longer exercises the same degree of influence. "Oh, yes, Sandra Bernhard," younger women will say when I ask them what Sarah Bernhardt's name means to them. They think I am referring to today's stand-up comic and singer. Yet this is not just a case of cultural confusion. Beyond the similarity of their names and their ethnic identities (both Jewish), Sarah Bernhardt and Sandra Bernhard are associated with the idea of women provoking controversy by making spectacles of themselves. The sharp-tongued comic, like the outspoken and flamboyant tragedienne before her, has built a public persona by deliberately acting out of the bounds of traditional female behavior, in part by calling attention to her own self-importance. Watching Sandra Bernhard's 1990 film, *Without You I'm Nothing* (based on her popular off-Broadway play by the same title), we see that she has deliberately sought to identify herself with the legendary French actress—as when the announcer in a Los Angeles nightclub where Bernhard is performing makes the deliberate "mistake" of twice introducing her as "Sarah Bernhardt."[3] More recently Bernhard's 1998 show, suggestively titled "I'm Still Here . . . Damn It!" simultaneously pushes the audience to confirm her own staying power as a celebrity (à la Sarah Bernhardt) while viciously mocking the vanities of other stars.[4]

This is not a biography of Sarah or Sandra, but the issues raised by the unorthodox public careers of both women are central to the intellectual project of this book. My interest is in how and why performers like Sarah Bernhardt and some of Sandra Bernhard's cultural predecessors in the American popular theater exercised such a powerful sway upon late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century public consciousness, and how their work on the stage contributed to changes in women's social roles and cultural representations.

In the years between the late 1880s and the end of the 1920s, theater was America's foremost entertainment industry. Popular entertainments like vaudeville, musical revue, and musical comedy as well as so-called legitimate drama were central institutions of commercial leisure, critical arenas for cultural exploration, and powerful agents of cultural transformation. *Female Spectacle* is a study of some of the ways that popular the-

ater helped to define the modern sexual and social terrain. It argues that in a crucial epoch of historical upheaval, female performers became agents and metaphors of changing gender relations, and it shows the importance of the popular theater as a venue for acting out and staging the cultural, social, and political assertions as well as the anxieties associated with the era of the New Woman.

The phenomenon of spectacle was at the heart of that era's public culture. It is also the central concern of this book. On stage and off, turn-of-the-century women were increasingly drawing attention to themselves, asserting their rights to education, to political participation, to employment, to sexual expressiveness, to a voice as cultural critics. The New Women of the American popular theater—Gertrude Hoffmann, Fanny Brice, Nora Bayes, Marie Dressler, Cissie Loftus, Trixie Friganza, Aida Walker, Eva Tanguay, Elsie Janis, and scores of others, including Sarah Bernhardt (the spectacle of spectacles)—occupied a rather unique place in their own cultural moment. As performers, they exercised a degree of freedom that was rarely available to women in public. Nevertheless they were also influenced and constrained by the conventions of the theater as an institution, and by the culture in which they were situated. This book examines popular theater's expressive possibilities for women performers and its effect on audiences. It points to the pivotal importance of theater for women's changing public images and self-definitions. And it illuminates the ways in which widely divergent forms of female spectacle resonated with and helped shape larger off-stage social and cultural developments.

Assertive self-spectacle *by* theater women was of crucial importance for changing concepts of womanhood at the turn of the century. Equally significant was the way theatrical producers made a spectacle *of* women, positioning them as passive objects for audience consumption. The result was a dynamic tension between women's desire (on as well as off the stage) to use theatrical spectacle as a vehicle for achieving greater voice in culture and politics, and theater's countervailing urge to turn female spectacle into a symbolic expression of male mastery. It is in the interplay between active and passive female spectacle that we see most vividly how the theater became an important progenitor of two very different, but nevertheless equally modern, concepts of femininity.

The various kinds of female spectacle played out on the popular stage cannot be understood outside of several overlapping historical contexts:

the history of American theatrical practices, the history of gender relations, and the wider social, cultural, and intellectual ferment of which they were a part.

Although historians have acknowledged the significance of popular entertainments for our understanding of the re-negotiation of gender roles and relations in the twentieth century, they have devoted relatively little attention to the specific contributions of theater to the emergence of a modern feminist perspective.[5] Looking at women's history through the lens of the popular theater forces us to complicate our way of thinking about the past. It is customary to talk about the period from the 1880s to 1910 as the time that preceded the birth of modern feminism in the United States. Women were active in various kinds of civic and political reform movements in the 1880s and 1890s, the argument goes, but it was not until about 1910, with the emergence of a reinvigorated suffrage movement and the entrance of a younger, more diverse, and ultimately more radical generation of women activists, that we witness what historian Nancy Cott has called the "grounding of modern feminism."[6]

When we turn to the theater, however, it becomes clear that the grounding of modern feminism began as early as the 1880s and 1890s. By 1910, when off-stage feminists were first beginning to see themselves as a social and ideological formation, the feminist moment within the theater was already well underway. What made the period from 1880 to 1910 a feminist moment in the popular theater was neither a widely shared set of ideological principles, nor a specific political agenda or movement among female performers. For that matter, "feminist" was not a term that most of these performers would have used to describe themselves. Rather, the feminism of women on stage was a form of cultural and professional practice. Theater women articulated—through their performances and their professional careers—some of the themes that later became central to the projects of off-stage women who called themselves feminists.

The feminism that emerged off stage in the 1910s was less a coherent movement than a set of principles and goals. These included the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, and the idea that although men and women were biologically different, gender roles and identities were not "predestined by God or nature" but shaped by socialization. Unlike their predecessors of the suffrage and reform movements in the nineteenth century, these more modern feminists did

not believe that all women shared a common set of concerns. They acknowledged that women differed from each other across class lines and other points of social location, but they believed that it was necessary for women to organize together in order to attain equality with men.[7] After 1910 two other themes became increasingly important to the emerging feminist agenda. One was the demand that women be given greater freedom to express their sexuality. Feminists called for more honest acknowledgment that women had sex drives and insisted on an end to the double standard of morality.[8] The other was a growing emphasis on the theme of "individualism—in the sense of self-development," in Nancy Cott's words. Feminists labeled this the right to "realize personality," by which they meant the right of a woman to claim her independent identity, a selfhood independent not only of what men would impose upon her but also separate from other women. Feminist anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons put the matter somewhat differently when she wrote in 1916 that "the *new woman* means the woman not yet classified, perhaps not classifiable, the woman *new* not only to men, but to herself." Feminist demands for a greater sexual freedom for women and for their right to an independent "personality," were, as Cott suggests, crucial "forms of cultural blasphemy." Because they amounted to a rejection of more traditional belief in femininity as sexual purity and self-sacrifice, these were the values that made modern feminists "modern."[9]

But modern feminism did not come about all at once in the 1910s. Other historians have shown that in the late 1860s and 1870s and early 1880s, a small but highly visible band of women's rights radicals, among them Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Anna Dickinson, and Victoria Woodhull demanded economic and political equality for women and their freedom to function as private individuals in the public sphere. Some, like Woodhull, were "sex" radicals who condemned conventional marriage for stifling female passion. Others saw suffrage as the key to female emancipation. The most radical argued that "woman was made for herself" and deserved a full and complete life.[10] For all of their boldness, however, these nineteenth-century rebels did not have a wide popular appeal.

In the 1880s and 1890s, however, another highly visible group of unorthodox females—well-paid and independent women who made their living in the theater—were beginning to carry some of those radical notions into the cultural mainstream. They helped make unorthodox

female behavior more attractive and enjoyable than the nineteenth-century political radicals had been able to do and, as a consequence, helped give new views of women wider acceptance. Aided by commercially minded producers who understood that male and female audiences would pay to watch bold New Women, these self-conscious performers demonstrated and encouraged new ways of acting female.

Not all of the tenets of early twentieth-century feminist ideology were put into practice by the New Women in the popular theater either before or after 1910. Yet on the critical demand for women's right to sexual expressiveness and personality or self-development, female performers clearly constituted a kind of proto-feminist vanguard. The creativity with which female performers put these cultural blasphemies into practice in the years between 1880 and 1910 laid some of the groundwork for feminism even before the term was coined. Precisely for that reason, both the theater and the proto-feminist figure of the actress became important symbols and resources for female activists who engaged in various forms of political agitation in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Rather than call women who performed in the popular theater feminists or even proto-feminists, however, I refer to them as New Women. The New Woman was a social reality and a cultural concept. Coined at the end of the nineteenth century, the term was used from the 1890s to the end of the 1920s to describe women who experimented with new forms of public behavior and new gender roles. The usage was inconsistent and was applied to and appropriated by several generations of assertive women who defied traditional expectations. At the turn of the century, ambitious, educated middle-class women, many of whom eschewed marriage and dedicated their lives to the cause of social reform and political agitation (including women's rights), were labeled New Women. By the time of World War I, the term described a younger generation of independent women who demanded not only economic, political, and intellectual opportunity, but also sexual fulfillment. It included, but was not limited to, those who thought of themselves as feminists.

The New Women of the popular theater overlapped chronologically with several generations of so-called emancipated women. But they also differed from them in crucial ways. First, as women of the stage they occupied a unique cultural and social zone where females were not only permitted but expected to live unconventional lives and play unortho-

dox parts. Indeed, in the period from the late 1870s up to the time of World War I, the stage was practically the only place where a woman could be rewarded in spite of, or even because of, her transgressiveness. Second, and even more significant, the stage encouraged women to cultivate their individuality and their uniqueness, the very qualities that came to be seen as the building blocks of human personality. Stage women of all kinds demonstrated the distinctive force of their personalities. But nowhere was this more apparent than in vaudeville. There, Caroline Caffin observed in her 1914 study, the approach of these performers was "personal and unashamed." Vaudeville women greeted the spectators "straight in the face" and said in effect, "Look at ME! I am going to astonish you!"[11]

By opening a space for female performers to become *both* spectacles *and* personalities, the popular theater promoted the development of the first self-consciously "modern" expression of new womanhood. Henry James marks its appearance in his 1890 novel, *The Tragic Muse:* the central character is an actress whose "greatest idea must always be to show herself." Miriam was a "strange girl," who "exhibit[ed]" her "body" and "soul" before crowds of onlookers for money. But her strange self-spectacle, which obliterated the ideological dividing line between the private sphere (associated with femininity) and the wider public sphere (associated with masculinity), had more than commercial value. Rather, James writes, she was "a real producer . . . whose production is her own person."[12] James was not the only novelist who turned the figure of the actress or female performer into a symbol of women's longing for personhood. In different but related ways Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Mary Austin's *A Woman of Genius* (1912), and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915) also used the performing woman to explore this theme of female self-production through stage spectacle.[13]

These characters, the stuff of literary fantasy, had their real-world counterparts. While theater's capacity to create new images and representations of women made it an important incubator for modern ideas about femininity, equally important was the crucial role that female performers played in the process of representing themselves. The extraordinary self-consciousness with which they positioned themselves in relationship to modern social, intellectual, and aesthetic practices and debates made them more than symbols of cultural change. They were also active participants in and critical observers of their own cultural moment.

Their participation was complicated by the diverse positions of women within the theatrical hierarchy, by the racial tensions of the time, and by the gender politics of the popular stage. The fierce political agitation around women's rights and suffrage that occurred in the pre- and post-Civil War eras, the hardening of the color line at the turn of the century, and the growing immigrant presence shaped the broader social context in which the popular theater developed, the issues addressed on stage, and the ways they were handled.

Theater mattered to women. But the role it played in the emergence of modern feminist consciousness was hardly without ambiguities or contradictions. Although the stage did not so much resolve as register debates about changing gender roles and other modern anxieties, there were nevertheless clearly identifiable moments when women's voices were either amplified or suppressed by stage spectacle. And the balance between those moments would shift with the times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, popular theater gave women important new sources of cultural authority and visibility. Ironically, however, theater reworked older stereotypes of the so-called emancipated female and spawned its own particular set of New Woman typologies. Thus the stage contributed to changing ideas about female identity in paradoxical ways, criticizing even while promoting the notion of female emancipation. For just as the institution of the theater welcomed and profited from the unorthodox behavior of women on stage, it was frequently hostile to women's growing assertiveness off stage. This hostility was the source of new visual and rhetorical representations that challenged the very idea of an independent female personality. By the time of World War I, and increasingly in the 1920s, competition between the spectacle of female self-assertion and theatrical spectacles that worked to obliterate the notion of female autonomy and personality turned the stage into a battleground of ideas and images.