

The Marvellous Monsieur Sardou

Part I

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*Anything coming from Sardou notably interests the world,
but it particularly intoxicates Parisians.*¹

Now largely forgotten, Victorien Sardou (1831–1908) was one of the most popular and prolific of 19th-century French playwrights, known far and wide for his seventy plays, most of which were incredibly successful and starred the leading performers of the time, including Sarah Bernhardt, Gabrielle Réjane, Frédérick Lemaître and Benoît-Constant Coquelin. Generally, the critics heaped praise on Sardou: He was called ‘the dean of French dramatists’ and ‘the master of the well-made play’. Among his playwriting peers were Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas (*fils*) and Eugène Scribe. Yet today, his name has lost its former lustre, and if remembered at all, it is for just three of his plays: *La Tosca* (1887), which starred Sarah Bernhardt and which became the basis for Puccini’s illustrious opera of 1900; *Fédora* (1882), which supplied the word for the ever-fashionable hat, featured Bernhardt in the title role, was turned into an opera in 1898, a novel in 1894 and nine films produced between 1915 and 1947; and *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1893), written for Réjane, Bernhardt’s great friend and rival, and which became an opera in 1915 as well as six films made between 1900 and 2002.²

While these are some impressive credits, I have discovered that Sardou was much more than just a successful playwright. What is

1. *New York Times*, 15 February 1891, p. 12

2. Gabrielle-Charlotte Réju, known as Réjane (1856–1920), celebrated French actress who headlined in several Sardou plays. The glamorous title role of *Madame Sans-Gêne*, the outspoken laundress who become a duchess, later starred Gloria Swanson in the 1925 film, Arletty in the 1941 version and Sophia Loren in the 1961 production.