

FALL 2009

WMS 490

ONLINE

THE DIVA



Enter the high-stakes world of “The Diva.” Divas, beginning with actress Sarah Bernhardt, break all the rules of society that hamper women’s freedom of expression, movement, and association. Divas use their status as privileged outsiders to resist authority and patriarchy. As artists, Divas renew old art forms or invent new ones. As women, they defy sexual norms and attempt to set their own terms with society. They help women and all other “outsiders” aspire to a fully-lived life. This course will explore a select group of 19th and 20th-century Divas, in their own words and in biography and criticism, placing them in the context of contemporaneous art, music, theater and literature, and against the tumultuous politics and wars between post-Napoleonic Europe and present-day America. Figures studied will include Sarah Bernhardt, the world’s greatest actress; Isadora Duncan, the inventor of Modern Dance; opera star Maria Callas, who revived the high-flying coloratura singing style in the mid-20th century; Eva “Evita” Perone, a radio actress who rose to be virtual co-ruler of Argentina; pop singer Madonna, who portrays Evita on film; and, finally, the Anti-Diva, the transvestite actor known as “Divine,” featured in films by John Waters.

Divas act out extreme passions and extreme commitment to ideals in their art; in their lives they push the boundaries of individual freedom. French actress Bernhardt lived through revolutions and the anti-Jewish frenzy of the Dreyfus case; Duncan shocked society by dancing barefoot, refusing to marry her lovers, and opening a dance school in Soviet Russia; Peron, wife of populist dictator Juan Peron, galvanized Argentina’s women and created a political and social legacy that still haunts Latin America.

Students will be challenged to read and interpret the sometimes conflicting accounts of these artists’ lives and careers, and to examine common threads, including resistance to authority/patriarchy, exploitation by managers and agents, the commercial use of the Diva’s image, and other intriguing aspects of art and culture. We will also look at the psychology of Diva worship, its role in gay culture, and how the “camp” parodies of the Diva counterbalance hero worship. This online WebCT course includes images, film and sound clips.

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