

Preface

My interest in Helena Modjeska began during my first visit to California in 1998. I came across many traces of the actress in the area, mainly in the names – a little town here, a railway station there, a highway, or a canyon. A person could even enjoy a *cutlet à la Modjeska* at a local restaurant. Still, Modjeska was not as well known there as I had expected. I must admit that my own knowledge of her was limited as well. I knew that she was a famous actress, that she came from Kraków, that she married the aristocrat Karol Chłapowski, and that her son, Rudolph, was an American architect and bridge designer. I knew that she played many Shakespearean heroines and that she was a close friend of Henryk Sienkiewicz, who wrote about her triumphs in *Letters from a Journey*. That was all. What kind of person she was, what she dreamt of, or how her personal and artistic lives evolved – I was entirely unfamiliar with these. The only “relics” that I had seen were her portrait by Tadeusz Ajdukiewicz at The National Museum in Kraków and the costume that she wore when playing Rosalind in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. With the California impressions fresh in my mind, I returned to Poland and embarked on a reading quest – I read practically everything on Modjeska that was available in Polish libraries. I was drawn into Helena’s world ever more deeply. She came to life particularly in her own writings. As a result, I began to feel as if I had known her for years: we became friends, and I would imagine long conversations with her. When I came across a disparaging comment, I automatically tried to defend her, searching for an appropriate reason. Sometimes I noticed her mistakes, but this did not discourage my unconditional affection. She became dear to my heart.

Among the many publications on Helena Modjeska that I found inspiring, the one that stands out most was her own book, *Memories and Impressions*. She recorded her thoughts all her life: in her youth she wrote a diary; later, a journal. But it was in Arden that Helena seriously started her memoirs. She found peace and quiet there; she had time to sort out issues and concerns; she was in a good position to regard her life from a distance. I found it striking how Modjeska interpreted facts through her own feelings; how she created her image according to what and who she aspired to be. This process seems very natural and human, but it must be taken into account when one works on a biography.

The Life of Modjeska (Żywot Modrzejewskiej), by Józef Szublewski, was another reliable resource. The author's use of chronological order, supported by journals, letters and other publications, was very helpful. He reviewed and analyzed the facts, giving a full picture of Modjeska's life and art. An item that supplemented the *The Life of Modjeska* was a collection of letters, *Correspondence of Helena Modjeska and Karol Chłapowski (Korespondencja Heleny Modrzejewskiej i Karola Chłapowskiego)*, selected and edited by Emil Orzechowski.



Helena Modjeska. Photo courtesy of the Theater Museum at the Grand Theater-Polish National Opera, Warsaw.

Then there was Tymon Terlecki's *Madame Helena (Pani Helena)*, which I read as if it were a novel. The author used commonly available sources, but his interpretation of Helena's personality went beyond mere facts. I loved his colorful descriptions, his attempts at explaining her mo-

tives, and his efforts to depict events from the cause-and-effect standpoint. As a consequence, I fell under his spell and accepted his portrait of Helena Modjeska as the most true one.

Finally, I would like to mention *Helena-A Story of Modjeska* (*Helena-Rzecz o Modrzejewskiej*), a play by Kazimierz Braun. Braun is a theater scholar and director, Professor of Theater at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I was unfamiliar with the play when I wrote the biographical part of this book; I saw the play only later, after moving to Toronto – I was deeply impressed. This monodrama was performed with imposing bravado by a Polish actress, Maria Nowotarska (who is originally from Kraków and now lives in Canada.) This experience sparked an impulse to read the text of the play – the text, which was based on wide research and contained many interesting references. Along with Professor Braun’s suggestions, the play contributed to my broader perspective on this great artist from the turn of the 20th century.

While reading the actress’s memoirs and publications about her, I noticed a persistent basis for everything that Helena Modrzejewska did: a need to combine the world of the theater (including the lives of the heroines that she played) with her personal life. These two areas continually overlapped, and the borders between them often blurred. That notion became the basis for this book.

I divided the book into three parts. The first part is biographical and its aim is to reveal the life of a beautiful woman and a star – an ugly duckling turned into a graceful swan. The second chapter is devoted to Modjeska’s theatrical roles, showing how she injected herself into the heroines she was playing, how she “improved” them, how she justified their actions, and how she spent significant time studying each of them in order to understand them better. In the final chapter, I show the reverse process, in which theater entered reality. It was through this process that the California Arden, inspired by Shakespeare, was created. Here Modjeska’s poetic dreams were finally realized.

This book is meant to be informative, but not encyclopedic. I wanted it to be a guide “with soul.” Naturally, I had to make difficult choices and show only certain aspects of this great star’s life. I wanted to share my own perspective on Helena Modjeska, which was shaped by extensive research and my visit to Modjeska Ranch. My aspiration was to create a portrait of an artist – not a photographic image, but rather a watercolor sketch with colorful, sometimes incomplete brush strokes. I must humbly leave it to readers to judge whether I was successful in achieving these goals.