

Review of: Beth Holmgren, *Starring Madame Modjeska. On Tour in Poland and America, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012.*

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Beth Holmgren's book is a monograph of Helena Modrzejewska/Modjeska (1840-1909), the famous Polish-American stage star. The author's purpose was "to introduce a little-remembered actress to a new American audience" (p. 15). This plan was successfully completed. "Starring Madame Modjeska" is not just a popularized biography but a result of meticulous research and intellectual elaboration. It can be extremely useful for Polish readers (scholars) as it makes use of American resources and a large bibliography inaccessible in Poland. It also presents an analytical rather than simply apologetic attitude, showing a spectrum of roles Modjeska played on- and offstage.

Beth Holmgren's work fits into a series of recent events and publications devoted to Modjeska in Poland. [1] While Polish scholars concentrate on primary sources editions (both American and Polish), the Californian professor was much more courageous. She decided to research and retell Modjeska's story.

When Modjeska got on with preparing her autobiography ("Memoirs and Impressions"), by then having already lived in America for fifteen years, she began with her 1890 visit to Kraków. It was against chronology but justified by the narrative strategy. The star was looking back at her Polish roots, at the same time being firmly settled in her new American homeplace. Beth Holmgren uses a similar strategy. She begins the story with the San Francisco debut of Helena Modjeska in August 1877. This is the key to the whole book: showing Modjeska as a bilingual actress whose ambition was to remain a stage celebrity for the Polish audience and at the same time reach American stardom. Subsequently Holmgren refers to the earlier biographical stages in Modjeska's life: her youth and family life in Kraków (1840-1860), her theatre apprenticeship as a provincial itinerant actress, her non-marital relationship with Gustaw Zimajer (vel Modrzejewski), and finally her legal marriage to the heir of a noble family Karol Chłapowski (1868). Holmgren describes how Modjeska achieved a loftier social and artistic status in Kraków City Theatre (Teatr Miejski w Krakowie, 1865-1868) and how she totally internalized the ideal of a lady-like woman and a genius actress while working for The Warsaw Imperial Theatres (Warszawskie Teatry Rządowe, 1868-1876).

The following parts of the book present Modjeska seeking for laurels and home in America. Within twenty five years she toured around the country twenty four times, establishing her contacts with American elites, and

trying at the same time help her husband run a ranch. The couple owned altogether three residences which were the foundation of Modjeska's family life in America. Finally, Holmgren gives a deeply moving description of Modjeska's last tour: her funeral ceremonies in America and in Poland. The Polish career of Modjeska precedes her career in America, that is obvious. The real success of Beth Holmgren is in showing the deep and organic link between Modrzejewska and Modjeska, or, in other words, both the Polish and the American identity of the star.

As the title of the book suggests, the union between the two parts of Modjeska biography consists in her self-creation project. The extremely gifted, workaholic and ambitious Helena Mizel, the illegitimate child of a middle-class widow, had planned to overcome social and political limits through art seen as the ultimate human activity. Modjeska's self-creation project did not mean merely posing or pretending to be who she was not. Her attitude was closer to the idea represented by the Greek "paideia" which meant cultivating one's skills, virtues and abilities in order to become a consummate human being and an active citizen. She in the end became whom she had wanted to be. She was one of the best Shakespearian actresses of her time and a mentor for young actors, as well as a promoter of theatre professionalization. She also became a great cosmopolitan lady, at the same time playing the role of an immigrant matriarch. Although she was a naturalized American, she remained an ambassador and even incarnation of the Polish nation-without-state. The amazing range of all Modjeska's roles was described and analyzed by Holmgren with real talent, sensitivity and humor.

The author seems to be extremely well acknowledged with recent Polish studies in theatre history [2] and draws on a large choice of resources, both in English and Polish. Beth Holmgren (who in fact speaks and reads Polish) refers to the 19th century Kraków and Warsaw press releases as well as to American reviews, and to a set of memoirs concerning Modjeska (for instance, the memoir by Modjeska's gardener Theodore Payne).

The book can be very instructive for Polish scholars thanks to its American perspective, which offers a fresh look into the matter. Some Polish presumptions have a chance to be corrected, for example the one the inferiority of the American stage when compared to the European (and Polish) standards. The star system in the United States was different from the European, which does not mean it should be treated as worse. San Francisco was not a cultural desert as some people might imagine. On the contrary, it turned out to be less tradition-bound and offered Modjeska an excellent chance to continue her "self-made woman" project.

Holmgren's book brings interesting details on Modjeska as a powerful lecturer on behalf of women organizations as well as a pioneer of an ecological movement for the preservation of Californian nature. These two roles of "American Modjeska" are less known to the Polish readers therefore this can be considered a yet another asset of Holmgren's work.

The author also examines Modjeska's position within the Polish diaspora in America, whose members recruited mostly from the lower class. Like her compatriots, she was a devout Catholic. She had contact with priests as the leaders of the Polish immigrants' community. On the other hand, the author manages to emphasize Modjeska's feminism and readiness to promote new playwrights like Ibsen and Sudermann (both defending women's case). Madame Modjeska comes across as a real 'institution' representing wisdom, charity, stage genius, and high intellectual and moral values. In her 60s she is a kindhearted woman of iron will, betrayed by

her fragile body.

The good points of the book are so impressive that one can easily forgive the author misspelling a few Polish names or calling Wit Stwoszcz a "Polish artist" (in fact he was born in Germany and later settled and worked in Kraków). The author's opinion about the Warsaw director Jan Chęciński seems a bit controversial (p. 94, 104). He might have been regarded as a "crazy intriguer", but without his skills in preparing scripts and stage directing, Modjeska would not have created her famous Shakespearian heroines. Holmgren underestimates Chęciński at the same time emphasizing Modjeska's artistic independence. New research [3] shows they both participated in promotion of the classic repertory. Directors and managers of Polish permanent theatres were always male so it is rather improbable that anyone would have considered Modjeska in that role in 1876 (p. 104). The author's opinion that the Warsaw stage was already declining in the 80's also seems slightly exaggerated (p. 278). The Warsaw Imperial Theatres did have their ups and downs, nevertheless they offered the highest preparation standards in Poland as the rehearsal schedule was extended over a longer time. It stemmed from the simple fact that the Warsaw theatre gave a premiere once a month – while in Kraków a new drama was staged every Saturday (four times a month). Being a persona non grata in the tsarist Warsaw after her Chicago patriotic oration, Modjeska was then separated from the biggest and the most important Polish stage.

"I'm living like someone who has lost a lung and struggles to breathe" (p. 153) – said Modjeska about her Polish nostalgia that made her revisit Poland as often as she could. The two lungs metaphor is a good conclusion of this review. Anyone who studies Modjeska's life and art has to balance both the Polish and the American perspective. The book by Beth Holmgren provides Polish readers with the "lost lung" which helps to breathe along with Modjeska.

References:

[1] The special issue of "Pamiętnik Teatralny" (2009 no 3-4), catalogues of two exhibitions: "Helena Modjeska. For the Love of Art" (Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2009) and „Helena Modjeska – Icon of Style. From Distance to Temptation" (Warszawa: Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, 2013) and the new edition of Modjeska's letters ("Modrzejewska/Listy", ed. E. Orzechowski and A. Kędziora, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2015).

[2] Dariusz Kosiński, „Sztuka aktorska w polskim piśmiennictwie teatralnym XIX wieku. Główne problemy" (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2003); Dariusz Kosiński, „Dramaturgia praktyczna. Polska sztuka aktorska XIX wieku w piśmiennictwie teatralnym swej epoki" (Kraków: Towarzystwo Naukowe Societas Vistulana, 2005).

[3] See: Agnieszka Wanicka, "Dramat i komedia Teatrów Warszawskich 1868-1880" (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011).



Sposób cytowania:

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America, 2012, w: <https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/264#r3702>.

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