The Art of Playing Patriot: The Polish Stardom of Helena Modjeska
Beth Holmgren

Theatre Journal, Volume 62, Number 3, October 2010, pp. 349-371 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v062/62.3.holmgren.html
The Art of Playing Patriot: The Polish Stardom of Helena Modjeska

Beth Holmgren

In July 1876, Poland’s premier actress, Helena Modrzejewska (1840–1909), quit the Warsaw Imperial Theaters for a year’s leave of absence in America, claiming poor health. By August of the following year, she had memorized two roles in English—Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé’s salon melodrama Adrienne Lecouvreur and Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet—and debuted with great success under the Americanized name of Helena Modjeska in San Francisco’s California Theater. San Francisco provided her a sophisticated yet less demanding entrée into the American theatre than did the main stages of New York. Applauded for her sure psychological grasp of her roles, meticulous technique, and beauty of person and costume, the foreign-accented Modjeska subsequently reigned for almost thirty years as an American star, acknowledged as America’s greatest Shakespearean actress of her day and heeded as an authoritative spokeswoman for a refined late-nineteenth-century American theatre.

Even more remarkable was Modjeska’s simultaneous rebirth in August 1877 as a Polish star overseas. Both Polish and American theatre historians have yet to analyze how this extraordinary actress maintained a bi-national career until her death in 1909. American scholars have presumed that hers was an immigrant success story, a predictable passage from a poor “old world” to the new world’s “promised land.” In coming to the United States, however, the actress had intended no permanent defection, but the launching of a parallel English-language career that she vainly hoped would culminate in regular guest tours on the London stage. Instead Modjeska discovered that the United States best served her professional and patriotic aims. Here she could manipulate an ever-growing stardom to advertise Polish artistic genius abroad. Her perceived provenance as an elegant “aristocratic” European, a Pole very different from the peasant immigrants then flooding into the United States, rendered her attractive and intriguing to American audiences. The impressive “Madame Modjeska” used her upper-class persona and the elite contacts she had secured in America to endorse other touring Polish performers and to bear witness to her homeland’s high culture (fig. 1).

Beth Holmgren is a professor of Slavic and Eurasian Studies and Theater Studies at Duke University. Her publications include Women’s Works in Stalin’s Time: On Lidiia Chukovskata and Nadezhda Mandelstam (1993); Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland (1998); the edited volume The Russian Memoir: History and Literature (2004); and a volume co-edited with Helena Goscilo, Poles Apart: Women in Modern Polish Culture (2006). Holmgren’s current research analyzes the careers and lives of Russian and Polish performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She has just completed the cultural biography On Tour with Madame Modjeska: Starring in Poland and America (forthcoming).

Although Modjeska would spend most of her post-1876 life and career in America, she also strived to maintain and, indeed, magnify her stardom in Poland with irregularly spaced, all-consuming “guest tours.” There, she transcended local theatre intrigues and her own aging with overseas cachet, unprecedented box-office appeal, and unflagging professional standards. She further endeared herself to her compatriots through extravagant demonstrations of generosity—namely, donations to and benefit performances for sundry charities and, invariably, the cause of the Polish theatre. This essay explores how Modjeska became Poland’s greatest star by distancing herself from her homeland and perfecting both overseas and in-country modes of playing the faithful patriot.

**Patriotism versus Parochialism**

Like most educated Poles during the first half of the nineteenth century, Modrzejewska had imbibed an intense, conspiratorial patriotism from her earliest years. By the end of the eighteenth century, an internally weakened Polish empire had fallen prey to its
land-hungry neighbors of Prussia in the west, Austria in the south, and Russia in the east, its territory divided into three foreign-ruled partitions. Modrzejewska was born in Kraków between the major uprisings of November 1830 and January 1863, both of which targeted the Russian occupiers and recruited Polish fighters throughout Polish territory. The future actress experienced the Austrian bombardment of a rebellious Kraków when she was six years old, and, as a young woman, she dressed in mandatory black and joined in processions and masses mourning Polish victims of Russian oppression.

As she progressed in her chosen vocation—first by touring the provinces, then starring on Kraków’s newly reformed stage, and ultimately taking the prestigious Warsaw Imperial Theaters by storm in 1868—Modrzejewska fully appreciated the actor’s key role in preserving Polishness in a besieged state. In the Russian partition, for example, the Polish language could be used publicly only in church or the theatre. A talented actor equaled a priest as national voice and symbol, if not as moral exemplar. Theatres in all the partitions could showcase Polish plays with Polish themes, costumes, traditions, and music, provided that these themes advanced no suspect political agenda. Explaining her early Polish career to her American readers, Modjeska depicted herself in her memoirs as a homely substitute for the warrior, “exchanging the armor for tinsel, and the weapon for words.”¹ During her seven years on the Warsaw stage, the actress labored to elevate her theatre’s repertoire with newly translated or revived works of Shakespeare, Friedrich Schiller, and the Polish poet and playwright Juliusz Słowacki, functioning as an exceptional female impresario, a general in costume, bent on the improvement of her nation’s culture.

Modrzejewska’s decision to try her professional luck elsewhere stemmed from a complex of reasons, including great personal ambition. Through her female mentor Maria Kalgiris-Mukhanova, the cosmopolitan, aristocratic wife of Sergei Mukhanov, the president of the Warsaw Imperial Theaters, the actress was introduced to great artists and artistic works from the European capitals. Kalgiris-Mukhanova expressly encouraged Modrzejewska to pursue a career as a touring virtuoso beyond the cultural backwater of her homeland, advising her “to study in German three Shakespearian parts—Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona—in order to perform them at the greatest dramatic festival in Weimar, where she would introduce [her] to the German stage and also to the greatest German of the time, Wagner.”² Modrzejewska had contemplated playing in a foreign language before she ever set foot on the stage; a number of Polish actors had already demonstrated the worldly reputation to be won elsewhere on the European continent. The actor Bogumił Dawison (1818–72) not only triumphed on German-language stages, but he also attempted an American tour (in German) a decade before Modrzejewska first sailed west (fig. 2).³

Such prospects grew the more tempting as the prima donna confronted one local obstacle after another in her quest to improve the Warsaw theatre. The Russian censor

² Ibid., 186.
³ See Wspomnienia aktorów (1800–1925), ed. Stanisław Dąbrowski and Ryszard Górski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963), 1: 461–63. In his diary, Dawison also describes how he left the Warsaw theatre, where his prospects were limited, for a career-boosting engagement at the Lwów Theatre in the Ukraine. See also Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 179–301.
balked at her proposal to present *Hamlet*—the story of a regicide—for her own benefit performance; only Kalergis-Mukhanova’s astute intervention saved the show. The self-interest or resentment of her colleagues hindered her efforts to develop a better ensemble. Wary of her building a theatrical dynasty, Modrzejewska’s rivals and ill-wishers deliberately scuttled her brother Feliks Benda’s chances of winning a contract with the Warsaw Imperial Theaters, despite the company’s lack of a strong romantic male lead. Unable to best her in performance, her opponents stooped to personal slander. One actor repeatedly caricatured and humiliated her husband Karol Chłapowski onstage, wrongly implying that Chłapowski, like the unsavory character being portrayed, was content to live off his wife’s money. As Modrzejewska suffered these setbacks in the early 1870s, she found ready soul mates in five young artists who attended her Tuesday “at homes”: the novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz and the four young painters Józef

---

Chelmonski, Adam Chmielowski, Aleksander Gierymski, and Stanisław Witkiewicz. The painters had returned home after studying and starving together in Munich only to discover that their art was dismissed as unorthodox by the Polish Academy and not "pretty" enough for mainstream Polish consumers. Witkiewicz concluded that there were only three options open to artists in 1870s Poland: to "remain at home and perish bit by bit, attend dinners and ‘evenings’ and allow oneself to be ‘sponsored,’ or go abroad." Poland, he bitterly observed, was quite ready to "export her artists."

Like her young friends and unlike Kalergis-Mukhanova, Modrzejewska was convinced that the best Polish artists easily matched their counterparts in Vienna, Paris, and London. She perceived Poland as a cultural backwater not in terms of local talent, but in her society’s philistine attitudes toward art. When she chose the third of Witkiewicz’s options, the actress did so not to abandon her homeland, but to teach it a lesson. Modrzejewska partially spelled out her strategy in a March 1877 letter, as she was feverishly preparing for her American debut:

Something whispers to me that staying away for a while will not hurt my standing with the Warsaw critics and public. I was beginning to bore them. Had I remained, they soon would have called me old and passée, but when I return, and return with new success, they will receive me with open arms! Everybody will find me younger and more attractive, because I shall bring with me fame from abroad to exalt my position. Somebody once said: "Une duchesse a toujours dix-huit ans pour un bourgeois." I left Poland as the leading lady of the Warsaw Theater. I shall return as an acknowledged star of foreign stages.

Once her parochial countrymen learned from the outside world how to value their artists, they would provide her the supportive working context she deserved.

The Cultural Ambassador

Nevertheless, the Polish actress’s venture abroad involved considerable risk. From the moment she stepped on the stage of the California Theater, Modjeska understood that she henceforth would play always before two audiences: the audience at hand and the audience abroad. Her stardom in two nations meant her permanent “double exposure”—a condition that she herself assiduously advertised so that absence never resulted in oblivion. Her bi-national stardom demanded her proficiency in two languages and cultures so that she could shine before both publics and effectively explain one to

---

5 Ibid., 213, 224–26.
7 Witkiewicz, “‘Największy’ obraz Matejki,” 48–49.
8 “A duchess is always eighteen-years-old to the bourgeoisie.”
10 For more on Modrzejewska’s struggles with Poland’s parochial stage, see Beth Holmgren, “Public Women, Parochial Stage: The Actress in Late Nineteenth-Century Poland,” in Poles Apart: Women in Modern Polish Culture, ed. Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2006), 11–35.
11 Modjeska was anxious about the news that Poles were receiving of her success, as she confides to her close friend Maria Faleńska: “I’m not worried about the masses, but I want those who love me a little (there still are such, yes?) to know how much truth there is in this Polish news” (letter, Modjeska to Faleńska, New York, 23 December 1877, in Got and Szczublewski, Korespodencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej, 1:399).
the other, persuading Americans of her homeland’s cultural prowess, and conversely educating Poles about the sophisticated people and accomplished artists she found in America, the land of big business.

Above all, Modjeska required a convincing defense of her American career as proof to her compatriots that her motives were altruistic and patriotic, not materialistic and self-interested. She therefore was fortunate to have had in place an eloquent champion at her San Francisco debut, a reviewer who might sweet talk her abandoned Polish audience into applauding her endeavor. Henryk Sienkiewicz, who later became the Nobel Prize–winning author of *Quo Vadis* and a trilogy of novels about seventeenth-century Polish imperial history, was embarking on his career during the 1870s and served as a kind of advance scout for Modrzejewska as she traveled west, writing sketches of America for the *Polish Gazette* and staying as close as he dared to his actress-idol. Sienkiewicz’s letters, published in the 10–11 October 1877 issues of Warsaw’s *Daily Courier*, relate a much-embellished, partisan account of Modjeska’s San Francisco performances.

Attending her opening night, Sienkiewicz joined other local Polish émigrés at the California Theater to fret over the larger impact of Modjeska’s success: “This was no longer just about the fate of one artist, but our fate all together, a question of defeat or victory. Anyone who knows the American people will understand how it was. In short, this performance was about winning new fame or shamefully losing face.”

Sienkiewicz cleverly portrays Modjeska—her statuesque figure, “womanly charm,” and “the tears and silver vibrating together” in her voice—as Poland on trial and Poland triumphant, a national incarnation whose human warmth and incomparable artistry move this “naturally cold audience” into uncharacteristic ecstasies.

Describing her performance and its aftermath, Sienkiewicz excelled as a Barnum-esque press agent for Poland’s star property abroad. He witnessed the standing ovation that could be heard in the streets outside on opening night, the overflowing houses at Modjeska’s subsequent performances, and an American press that outstripped Warsaw newspapers in its paens to her superiority over such celebrated predecessors as the French Rachel Felix and the Italian Adelaide Ristori. Sienkiewicz quotes verbatim the superlative praise uttered by California Theater manager John McCullough and Rose Eytinge, “one of the most famous actresses of the American stage,” who graciously postponed her succeeding engagement because, as she confesses, she “cannot play after such a genius.” Sienkiewicz proudly, if fancifully, reports that a new “vogue for all things Polish has cropped up in San Francisco,” to the extent that “all are incredibly thrilled” by Modjeska’s plan to play Ophelia’s mad scene in Polish.

Most importantly, Sienkiewicz foresaw in this debut an effective, durable defense of Modjeska’s patriotism. He rendered “our artist” supranational: “without ceasing to be Polish, she has become an artist of the world, like [the Polish painters] Siemiradzki and Matejko.” The actress could not claim the iconic martyrdom of political exile, as

---

13 Ibid., 353–54.
14 Ibid., 356. This phrase is quoted in the original English.
15 Ibid., 358.
16 Ibid., 357.
had Polish poets and statesmen who found refuge in Paris after the November 1830 uprising; these members of the so-called Great Emigration established themselves as the primary generator of Polish culture and agitated in vain for Poland's political liberation. In contrast, the artist Modrzejewska had come to America voluntarily and the Poles she met there were not rebel leaders to be worshipped, but isolated immigrants longing for the temporary repatriation she could effect by her performances. She appeared to the Polish community as an emissary, rather than as a fellow exile.

Over the course of her American career, Modjeska elaborated on the overseas patriotism that Sienkiewicz first sketched for his dubious Warsaw readership. She refashioned the traditional political role of the rebellious Polish artist in exile into the artist's voluntary service as Polish cultural ambassador. Such an ambassador left partitioned Poland in order to demonstrate the motherland's cultural greatness to the world, bear political witness for the occupied nation, and minister culturally and materially to the Poles scattered in the diaspora. Unlike the exiled artist, the cultural ambassador could return on occasion to minister to Poland itself. Modjeska consistently performed and publicized this role in America and subsequently cultivated a younger cadre of performer-ambassadors to follow her example. These patriotic protégés included Jan, Edward, and Józefina de Reszke, who were a family of world-renowned opera stars, and, above all, the virtuoso pianist Ignacy Paderewski.

Certainly, American audiences of all classes were moved and impressed by Modjeska's lofty Polish image, talented "expatriate" company, and moving tales of her homeland. Gilded Age writers, ranging from journalists Richard Hinton and Eugene Field to poets Celia Thaxter and Richard Watson Gilder, invoked her Polishness as both ennobling attribute and tragic heritage. Soon after her US debut, the San Francisco–based Hinton apostrophized her as "Sarmatia's daughter grand," and even the teasing Field, author of the tall tale "Modjesky as Cameel," in a later poem addressed the actress (unfacetiously) as "our Pole star" around whom "we rising sons" will revolve. At James and Annie Fields's Boston home, Thaxter captured Modjeska listening to Chopin as a melancholy Polish artist embodying her melancholy compatriot's music: "[S]he heard her Poland's most consummate voice / From power to pathos falter, sink and change; / The music of her land, the wondrous high, / Utmost expression of her genius strange,— / Incarnate sadness breathed in melody." Gilder's elegy "To Poland: On the Last Return of Helena Modjeska, 1909" dwells most fully and affectedly on the bond between the artist and her land "beloved of freedom and of art": "Though for all welcoming lands there was not dearth / Of love from her, yet loved she passionately / Only the tragic loveliness; only thee / Loved she supremely! Country of great

17 In Milton L. Kosberg’s “The Polish Colony of California, 1876–1914,” his 1952 master’s thesis from the University of Southern California, he notes that “it is misleading to think of the Modjeska colony as consisting of political refugees,” given their wealth and “the rather free intercourse between them and their native land after their abandonment of the Anaheim colony” (pp. 25, 71).
18 The de Reszkes were brothers and sister: Jan de Reszke (1850–1925) was a famous tenor, Edward (1853–1917) an equally famous bass, and Józefina (1855–91) an impressive soprano who left the stage upon marrying in 1885. Ignacy Paderewski (1860–1941) was Modjeska's junior by twenty years. Modjeska helped discover all these touring Polish stars.
19 I am quoting these poems from the anthology Madame Modjeska, Countess Bożena, ed. Emil Orzechowski and Kazimierz Braun (Buffalo: State University of New York at Buffalo Press, 1993), 16, 38.
20 Ibid., 24.
Sorrow— / Rise from weeping,—who weeppest now for her / Who was thy priestess
and thy worshiper.” Her poet admirers often interpreted her posed face and form as
the noblest embodiment of her oppressed nation—as “incarnate sadness” and “tragic
loveliness” (fig. 3).

The public and press also thrilled to her emotional meetings with other touring Pol-
ish greats. As one theatre historian stated a few years after Modjeska’s death: “Poland,
a small and unhappy country, has done more than its share in furnishing the world
with artists.” When the young pianist Józef Hofmann, another prodigy Modjeska
helped discover in Poland, attended one of her 1888 performances of Cymbeline in
New York, “[t]he audience quickly recognized him and broke into applause. Hofmann
stood up and made three profound bows. When Mme. Modjeska was recalled after
her strong scene in the second act, he threw her a bouquet, which she kissed. Again
the audience applauded heartily.” An 1892 interview with the actress in the Louisville
Courier-Journal depicts her as a kind of foremother of great Poles on tour. Describing
herself as “a pioneer Pole,” Modjeska declares how gratified she is to “hear praises of
my countrymen” in America, and how “all my people” following in her wake have
come to love America as well. She retells her story of Jean de Reszke’s first public
performance and her role in it: “He was then such a wee bit of a tot that he was afraid
to go on the stage alone, and I went with him and held his hand while he sang.”

Decades later, one of her supporting players, Howard Kyle, divulged her predictably
sad commentary when her troupe and the de Reszkies were performing not far from
each other in New York: “I knew them both when they were boys,” [Modjeska] said,
adding with a shade of melancholy: ‘Ah! Our country has no political life. There’s
nothing we can do but take up the arts.”

Of all her artistic protégés, however, Modjeska was most allied with Paderewski
through their intertwined performing histories, close friendship, and equal prominence
as highbrow artists on the American road. Modjeska truly helped launch Paderewski’s
career during her 1884–85 visit to Poland, instantly divining his musical genius when
their mutual friend Dr. Tytus Chałubiński presented “our second Chopin” to her in
the mountain resort town of Zakopane. By hosting a joint concert with Paderewski
in Kraków, the star ensured him of attracting a full house and earning 400 Austrian
florins for future travel and study. Paderewski scholar Maja Trochimczyk further credits
Modjeska with identifying his iconic attraction: his hypnotizing genius and angelic face
wreathed in golden hair. The experienced actress sensed his likely appeal to the British
acquaintances she had made during her few London seasons, the pre-Raphaelite artists
Edward Burne-Jones and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, both of whom painted his portrait.
When Paderewski commenced his 1891 US tour, Modjeska also introduced him to the

21 Ibid., 44.
23 For her account of discovering Hofmann as a seven-year-old prodigy, see Modjeska, Memories
and Impressions, 472–73. The newspaper report about Hofmann and Modjeska at her performance of
Cymbeline appears in an unidentified clipping in the MWEZ + n.c. 474 scrapbook at the New York
Public Library for the Performing Arts.
24 Louisville Courier-Journal, 26 February 1892.
York, 1938), 20.
26 Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 466; Szczublewski, Żywot Modrzejewskiej, 415.
Gilders and their relatives—a highly influential family in publishing—thereby guaranteeing him valuable publicity in Richard Watson Gilder’s journal The Century.²⁷

Being twenty years younger than his patron, Paderewski ascended as an international star while Modjeska’s American popularity plateaued. They overlapped as great Polish artists before the American public for a little over a decade. Whereas Paderewski eventually became a genuine artist-statesman, serving as the first prime minister of an independent Poland after World War I, Modjeska grabbed the headlines as Polish national spokesperson when the two participated in the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition. Their inclusion in the exposition formally enshrined the two Poles in the American highbrow pantheon.²⁸ In Chicago, Paderewski spoke only with his music. Modjeska, however, had been invited as a lecturer, not a performer, being asked to edify the American public about the respectability and true art of her profession in the exposition’s magnificent Woman’s Building.²⁹ On May 17th, she presented her planned lecture on “Woman in the True Drama.” Two days later, Modjeska had unexpectedly to serve as cultural ambassador when the delegates from Russian Poland failed to ap-

²⁸ Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 209, 217, 231.
²⁹ For more on this topic, see Holmgren, “Public Women, Parochial Stage.”
pear to deliver their address on women in contemporary Polish society. Hence May Wright Sewall, a suffragist in charge of the Women’s Congress Committee responsible for “speeches on topics of interest to women,” prevailed upon Modjeska to speak for her people just as she had spoken for her profession.

In her memoirs, the actress admits that hasty preparation and warm enthusiasm for her subject resulted in a less-than-prudent “choice” of expressions: “I said such words as my heart prompted me at the moment.” Her biographer Józef Szczublewski intimates that her forty-minute speech, which outshone those of the other panelists, amounted to a passionate, semi-rehearsed performance: “She presented the first part from memory, used prepared cards for the second part, and had memorized the third part. The speech targeted [Poland’s] three occupying empires and the ending was anti-tsarist.” This 1893 speech at the Chicago Columbian Exposition dared a remarkable, prolonged attack on her nation’s enemies in which Polish women, possessed of “courage, industry, patriotism, and patience,” figure as national heroines throughout Polish history—as self-reliant family managers, Spartan wives and mothers, “guardian angels” standing at the door of Polish men’s conscience, and collectively as the equivalent of a nationalistic Mother of God.

In delivering this speech, Modjeska stepped unhesitatingly beyond her customary role as ambassador into the dangerous territory of nationalist activism. Her performance as a real-life heroine, using “words” in lieu of “weapons,” won bravas in its local American context by harmonizing with the exposition’s emphasis on women’s great past achievements and gratifying an American audience (including new Polish Americans) that imagined its country to be the bastion against all tyrannies. In short order, a Polish translation of the speech circulated through all three partitions “as a conspiratorial text” and Modjeska herself was inundated with praise and thanks. The “next day,” she remembers, “most of the Chicago papers, in big editorials, alluded to my address in a most flattering way and added their own scathing comments upon the governments which had dismembered Poland, and especially on Russia.” Some of her compatriots replaced her title as “ambassador of Polish art” with “ambassador of the three partitions,” while others, such as the Association and Circle of Polish Women in Exile, hailed her as a patriot equal to Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski.

That Modjeska chose to voice her homeland’s grievances publicly suggests that she felt herself to be impervious to the kinds of repercussions that the original delegates had feared. In doing so, she behaved more like an American than a Polish star. She

---

31 Weimann, The Fair Building, 524.
32 Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 513. Terlecki notes a rumor that someone had slipped Modjeska the text at the last minute, thereby putting her authorship into question. But the reports of her memorization of the speech’s parts indicate, at the very least, that the actress had reviewed and endorsed what she presented. Tymon Terlecki, Pani Helena: Opowieść o Modrzejewskiej (London: Veritas, 1962), 230.
33 Szczublewski, Żywot Modrzejewskiej, 554.
34 In Fair Rosalind: The American Career of Helena Modjeska (Cheshire, CT: Cherry Hill Books, 1969), Marion Moore Coleman reprints the entire speech (624–30).
35 Szczublewski, Żywot Modrzejewskiej, 554.
36 Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 513.
37 Szczublewski, Żywot Modrzejewskiej, 556.
utilized her histrionic gifts to champion a political cause, much as her American sisters of the stage effectively campaigned for women’s suffrage. Modjeska knew well the sociopolitical power of the public podium in the United States. Nonetheless, she was to suffer as a Polish star two years later when, in 1895, upon her next return to Poland, she was forbidden to perform on the Warsaw stage. This tsarist interdiction remained in effect for the remainder of her life, despite her and her friends’ best efforts to placate the Russian authorities, including promised performances in St. Petersburg. The courageous act that qualified her for inclusion among the exalted company of Kościuszko and Pułaski seriously penalized her both financially and emotionally. Tsarist persecution also rendered her a noble Polish martyr and genuine exile in the eyes of the American public, for many did not grasp that Modjeska could still travel and perform within Poland’s Prussian and Austrian partitions.

**The Guest Star Patriot**

Modjeska’s engagement with the Polish stage necessarily changed over the years, from her triumphant returns in 1879 and 1880 and her victorious 1882 duel with Sarah Bernhardt, to the grand guest tours with which the avid Polish public had to content themselves during the 1890s and early 1900s. By 1882, the “renegade” prima donna recognized that theatrical standards of preparation and performance had deteriorated sharply in Warsaw. The 1895 tsarist edict forbidding her to perform on the Warsaw stage thus dealt her a profound though not fatal professional blow, because Modjeska still relished her whirlwind tours in the theatres of Kraków, Lwów, and Poznań. The actress’s final 1903 tour, dominated by her Kraków premieres of new plays, afforded the aging virtuoso a final triumph, which Warsaw could not provide. In early twentieth-century Kraków, Modjeska at last discovered a living Polish playwright, Stanisław Wyspiański, whom she could worship and in whose work she could still shine.

The calculation that Modjeska had made in the spring of 1877 proved correct: her return to Poland with foreign laurels after a lengthy absence did indeed boost and prolong her popularity. Moreover, she had chosen the perfect sentimental venue for her first welcome home when she participated in the exiled writer Józef Kraszewski’s 1879 jubilee in Kraków. The jubilee commemorated fifty years of Kraszewski’s work as a journalist, author of historical fiction, and general champion in preserving the Polish language and making Polish history accessible to all readers. The week-long festivities, which attracted over 11,000 visitors from all three partitions, included the unveiling of the restored Cloth Hall that dominated Kraków’s main square.

Modjeska’s reentry began as national obeisance, as she joined a select ensemble of stars from the Austrian and Russian partitions in paying tribute to another artist who had gained fame in the diaspora. Of the 4 October 1879 performance of Kraszewski’s play *Miód kasztelanski* (*The Castellan’s Mead*), with the city’s mayor and most prominent aristocrats in attendance, *Czas* (*Time*), the city’s chief newspaper, could report that “the greatest event . . . was the first appearance of Madame Helena Modrzejewska on the Polish stage after several years away gathering accolades overseas. . . . the applause

---

following her appearance must have reminded her of the ocean’s roar when she crossed it to claim new laurels and recrossed it because of her longing for her homeland.”

The Czas reporter had interpreted her venture just as Modjeska herself had intended it to be read. Modjeska’s hometown of Kraków—the new Polish capital for such large public commemorations—thus established the pattern of treating her guest tours as extraordinary events to be celebrated with ovations, parties, and national manifestations, all of which were duly reported in the press.

In contrast, Warsaw audiences first begrudged Modjeska ovations until they were brought to their feet by her Polish premiere of The Lady of the Camellias, concealed for censorship purposes under the title Maria Gauthier. Warsaw critics quickly conceded their mistake with an unprecedented outpouring of praise. Tygodnik Illustrowany (The Illustrated Weekly) openly admitted that Varsovians had been reeducated by their star:

It is hard for us to believe that the artist has made such enormous progress that the same public which seemed to cool towards her several years back now rightly recognizes her first-rate qualities with great fervor. Nevertheless, this is what has happened. We learned to value Modrzejewska when we lost her. She is what she was—only now we know what the stage is like without her. This is the key to the mystery.

By the end of 1879, press coverage of Modjeska overshadowed even political news; the humorous weekly Kurier świąteczny (Holiday Courier) issued a 100,000 ruble reward for an issue of any Warsaw paper with no mention of the star.

Whether or not her audiences believed the tales of her American fame, Modjeska’s return performances proved her worth to them all over again. The guest tours that Kłosy (Sheaves) celebrates as “truly festive days” ("świąteczne dni") made critics and patrons alike acutely aware that her genius could never more be taken for granted. Comparing before and after scenarios, the critics paid tribute to Modjeska’s power as a theatrical force—a standard-setter, an ensemble creator. Edward Lubowski, her onetime nemesis and now appreciative reviewer in Tygodnik Illustrowany, lauds “the movement and life Modrzejewska brings to our stage with her performance, the scale of comparison which her performance sets for us—in a word, the moral advantages which her presence in Warsaw provides. . . . Modrzejewska works and knows how to work, and, above all, prompts, encourages, and engages others with her work.” The critic fears out loud that her departure will allow the Warsaw theatre to regress to its former “sleepy dolce far niente” (sleepy, pleasant idleness). The theatre critic of Kłosy likewise marvels at how Modjeska enlivens the theatre’s atmosphere, direction, repertoire, fellow artists, and public, and urges her repatriation, because “a Polish artist has a hundred times greater duties [to her nation] than to those American impresarios.”

In contrast to these exhortations to return, however, were other Polish critics’ admissions that her experience in America had improved her acting. Modjeska’s former Kraków director Stanisław Koźmian was the first to pose this claim. Reviewing her

---

40 Czas, 5 October 1879.
41 Dabrowski, 20.
42 Tygodnik Illustrowany, 20 December 1879.
44 Kłosy, 13 and 25 December 1879, nr. 756, t. 29, 408.
45 Tygodnik Illustrowany, 21 February 1880.
46 Kłosy, 13 and 25 December 1879.
work in Victorien Sardou’s *Our Nearest and Dearest*, Koźmian confesses his relief that the actress has not been “Americanized” and therefore won over by an exclusively realist school, with presumably vulgar visual effects, but notes that Modjeska somehow has vanquished the greatest enemy of her talent—affectation: “We do not know if her contact with natural beauty or a more strongly pulsing life or a more wide-ranging public [effected this]. Her protean being found the strength to do the hardest thing of all—overcome herself.” Koźmian also posits the link between Modjeska’s new success as a tragedienne in Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* with her real-life ordeal in America. Praising her “force” in the play’s third act—an effect she never generated reliably before her trip—he attributes its source to “the same iron will which enabled Mme. Modjeska to embark for America, not knowing English, yet carefully nursing a hidden plan to perform there and so master the language in a year that she could perform in it, enrapture [her audience], and make her fame. Only faith, faith in oneself and one’s calling, as well as the will essential to such faith, can achieve these miracles.” Flexing her iron will in America apparently catapulted Modjeska into the ranks of the great tragediennes, for Koźmian declared her to be equal to the renowned Charlotte Wolter of the Vienna and Berlin theatres.

After the star had re-won Warsaw, Lubowski hypothesized that American nature, not culture, improved Modjeska’s performance by grounding her in the flesh, the “real.” He recalls how she once represented her characters as exclusively spiritual, as “almost ethereal and so scornful of matter that one could say they trod the earth unwillingly, . . . [But] her current performances attest to a complete transformation, perfecting and completing her idealistic qualities with real ones of extraordinary strength.” Even the critic Władysław Bogusławski, who once had reproved Modjeska for “playing Modjeska”—that is, her reinvention of herself as an aristocratic Varsovienne—ultimately acknowledged that different stages of her American career mined “the pure gold of her talent.” In his estimation, her first foray to the United States added dramatic force and lower tones to her voice, sharpness to her diction, and a quick decisiveness to her gestures. Her return to America after her London seasons forged in her acting a surety, independence, and “unprecedented balance” between “the heights of poetry” and “the depths of reality” (fig. 4).

Immediately after Modjeska’s death in 1909, Bogusławski expanded on his claims of America’s good influence on her acting, asserting that work in such an energized environment attuned to quick changes, resolute deeds, and a decided non-lyricism divested her of the precious salon conventions and concern for “fashionable chic” that Warsaw society had encouraged, much to her detriment. The United States had honed Modjeska into a stronger, more serious actress whose performance style had become more succinct and trenchant: “America’s frank realism joined with Europe’s artistic idealism, which only benefited from the alliance.” Apparently, the uncouth Yankees had liberated Modjeska from an aestheticism practiced to please and thus enabled her

---

47 *Czas*, 18 October 1879.
48 *Czas*, 23 October 1879.
49 *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, 17 January 1880.
52 Ibid., 292.
to perform the truth of her characters as she saw fit, whether or not upper-class Polish theatregoers liked or approved of the result. Oddly enough, America had transformed its star into a greater Polish artist.

That Modjeska was sorely missed, avidly embraced or “forgiven” by the Polish public, and pronounced “improved” after her sojourn in the United States gave her unprecedented power as both “national artist” and box-office draw. Doubled prices for her Kraków and Lwów performances in no way deterred patrons from packing the houses.\(^{53}\) *Tygodnik Illustrowany* reports fierce battles for tickets at the box office and on the streets of Warsaw, at one point the police having to enter the fray.\(^{54}\) The director of Poznań’s theatre company, Franciszek Dobrowolski, informed the actress in January 1880 that as soon as her performances were announced, “all the seats were literally


\(^{54}\) *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, 6 December 1879; Szczublewski, *Żywot Modrzejewskiej*, 293.
snatched up in a half day, despite the fact that the prices for every kind of seat were doubled. The orchestra was also sold out, even the smallest corners."

Thus during her first return tour to partitioned Poland Modjeska discovered that she had become a box-office deity. Her star rose above and beyond any Polish company. Her winter 1882 tour furthered her advance on national and international fronts, for she was competing specifically with Sarah Bernhardt, the greatest female star of her era. Despite the fact that the Warsaw public “was still intoxicated by the narcotic impressions” of the French virtuoso in early January 1882, the local papers soon declared Modjeska’s victory, while noting the two actresses’ stark differences. *Gazeta warszawska* (*Warsaw Gazette*) preferred the Pole’s “realism ennobled by the breath of poetry” to Bernhardt’s “dazzling photographic realism.” In *Tygodnik Illustrowany’s* more elaborated though nonetheless predictable judgment, critic Bronisław Zawadzki defines Bernhardt as an incomparable poet “of dissonance,” whose performance conjures “an atmosphere saturated with electricity” erupting in “nervous and violent explosions of temperament,” an approach that makes it difficult for her “to maintain a specific style, to articulate [a character] along classical lines, and to develop a regular progression of gestures and diction.” In contrast, Modjeska “always plays her roles, never herself, falsifying neither the poets nor life. . . . Her creation never succumbs to the caprice of a passing inspiration. The artist is sometimes bared by an extraordinary effect . . . but in this way her performance becomes the perfect poetry of harmony.”

After her 1882 triumph, Modjeska and the Polish public settled into a unique relationship that formalized the mutual idealization of star and fan. The Polish public never stopped hoping that Modjeska would permanently return to Poland. Yet theatregoers became accustomed to experiencing her guest tours as extraordinary visitations that exalted the theatre for their duration and then left feelings of dissatisfaction in their wake. Critic Konstanty Gorski sums up the experience by quoting Goethe, who observed that a bad guest star ruins local actors, whereas a good one ruins the audience. The press paid Modjeska copious tribute regardless of these after effects. As the reviewer in *Kłosy* commented: “[E]very guest tour of Mme. Modrzejewska’s adds something to our repertoire and, if none of these additions survives in the repertoire (*The Lady of the Camellias, Antony and Cleopatra, A Doll’s House*), that is surely because no one is brave enough to act a part she has distinguished and risk a comparison. . . . Introducing new or less known productions, she in any case helps us move forward and animates our stage.” Other critics attempted to comfort the actors who were suffering a loss of confidence after Modjeska’s departure: “Not every [actor] can rise so high, and there are enough places beneath for genuine talent, useful work, service, and recognition.”

For her part, Modjeska discovered that these intermittent visits not only gave her carte blanche to try out new repertoire, but they also extended and enhanced her star career in Poland in the only way possible: by featuring her as a rare, astonishingly well-preserved commodity. She operated outside of the repertory system, as any inter-

56 *Gazeta warszawska*, 9 and 21 January 1882.
57 *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, 28 January 1882.
58 *Czas*, 21 December 1890.
59 *Kłosy*, 31 January and 12 February 1885.
60 *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, 14 February 1885.
national guest star would, and was thus able to choose her starring roles, even if these required the local company’s quick preparation. Modjeska had outstripped the power of Polish directors who might have wanted to cast her in accordance with her age and the rival talents of younger actresses within their ensembles. As a visiting national phenomenon, she wielded the power to dictate the production of more Shakespeare plays in Poland, including *Antony and Cleopatra* (a drama she herself only attempted eighteen years later in America), *Much Ado About Nothing*, her American signature pieces *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, and, finally, *Macbeth*.

During her Warsaw years, Modjeska had long planned to try her skill as Shakespeare’s *young* Queen Cleopatra, but the exorbitant costs of the ornate production values required by this play had always dissuaded directors from attempting it. That the Warsaw theatre was willing to risk such expense in 1880 anticipated Modjeska’s great drawing power. Unfortunately, this Shakespeare play became the one exception to the great critical and financial successes of her subsequent offerings, despite the ten gorgeous, tightly fitted costumes she had had made in Paris “according to all the historical instructions about Egyptian costume.” In *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, Józef Kenig summed up the production’s problems: the unpopularity of the drama itself, the costs and difficulties in staging its grand scenes, the tasteless decisions of the director (such as a tableau vivant with harp music and a scene of the lovers harshly illuminated by electric light), and an inadequate supporting cast. Yet his review in no way damaged its star’s reputation, for only her performance fully impressed this demanding critic:

> We saw not only a passionate woman, always vehemently emotional, sensual and impulsive to the point of fury, but also tender and coquettish when need be, at once thoughtless and shrewd. But we also had before us a monarch of the East, who submitted with such pride and constraint when she had to kneel before the victorious Caesar that it was as if one of the great pyramids of her country had to abase itself before a lesser colossus.

During her guest tours, Modjeska’s critics, supporting casts, and public continued to remark her work ethic, thorough part-preparation, and stage knowledge. Lucyna Kotarbińska, who effectively co-managed the Kraków Theatre with her husband Józef during the star’s last tours there, remembers an indefatigable, exemplary professional: “Modrzejewska was eternally youthful until her last days. She arrived first at rehearsals, never parted from her role for a moment, although she had performed almost all the dramas featured on the guest-star playbills hundreds of times. While she was playing long-familiar roles, she was not only eager to learn new ones, but [was] also intrigued by the appearance of every new play or young author.” In two December 1894 letters to his wife, Józef Kotarbiński offers a somewhat franker picture of an aging Modjeska as Rosalind, admiring her strong discipline and superbly worked-out role in rehearsal and commenting on her opening night: “She performed well, but she is too old for the role, although she decked herself out sumptuously with costumes and lighting.” Kotarbiński’s more candid judgment reveals the happy paradox of Modjeska’s Polish guest tours: that no matter how much she aged, her great abilities, enormous national cachet, and temporary presence allowed her to play whatever roles she wanted.

---

61 *Gazeta warszawska*, 31 January and 12 February 1880.
Perhaps the greatest artistic benefit Modjeska derived from her Polish tours was her happy experience with gifted contemporary playwrights. The European sensibility of Polish critics, writers, and audiences enabled, rather than censored, the performance of Henrik Ibsen’s plays and the later flourishing of turn-of-the-century drama. Hermann Sudermann’s *Heimat*, rendered in Polish as *Gniazdo rodzinne* (*The Family Nest*), became an instant hit when Modjeska premiered it during her 1894–95 tour. The Kraków reviewer was knowledgeable enough to compare her performance favorably with that of Mme. Reisenhofer, “who first played the role under the watchful eye of its author in Berlin’s Lessingtheater.”

But long before Modjeska took up Sudermann’s play, she had mesmerized the Warsaw public with her 1882 *Nora*, the Polish version of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Whereas a priggish US culture resisted Ibsen’s work as a pernicious attack on family values, the Poles welcomed the playwright’s critique of a particular brand of melodrama: the *Odettes* and *Frou-Frous* in which empty-headed wives and mothers were led astray and killed off for their desertion. According to Julian Adolf Święcicki in *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, “[Ibsen] wanted to show here [in *A Doll’s House*] that if a husband is a lover-egotist, his wife a plaything, and the family incapable of thinking seriously, then that family cannot cope with the most minor life crisis and its flightiness will tear it apart.”

Regardless of the Poles’ enthusiasm for Ibsen, however, Modjeska would give only seven performances of *Nora* in Warsaw during her 1882 and 1884–85 tours.

During her final trips to Poland in the early 1900s, Modjeska happily immersed herself in the “high development of art and literature” that the neo-Romantic movement of “Young Poland” was fostering in her renovated hometown. In the process, she discovered a gifted trio of playwrights working in the Austrian partition: Lucjan Rydel (1870–1918), Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), and Gabriela Zapolska (1857–1921). Always excited by new artistic talent and in urgent quest of a contemporary Polish drama suitable for transposition to the American stage, the actress pursued professional relationships with each writer. As Modjeska’s husband and manager Karol Chłapowski explained to their young friend and theatre critic Konstanty Gorski: “[I]n the next season 1901/1902, my wife wishes to conclude her American career and would like to appear in a Polish play.”

Hoping somehow to educate US patrons about Poland with a drama featuring Polish history and Polish costumes, Chłapowski suggested Sienkiewicz, Zapolska, and Rydel as possible candidates for the job, although he warned that “we would not be able to use anything that smacks of decadence, Ibsen, or a la Annuntsio [sic].” He further recommended that the new work blend the gravitas of *Mary Stuart* and *Macbeth* with “a little comedy.”

---

64 Czas, 12 December 1894.
65 In this regard, Polish audiences resembled the 1890s London audiences that Gay Gibson Cima describes; for both, “the conventions of viewing” and reading gender roles and interactions were determined by the melodramas long-dominating their stages. Although feminist theatre critics today identify the “negative effect” of Ibsen’s plays “on the representation of women,” Cima argues that “to the actual women who staged Ibsen premières and to their audiences the scripts offered a real chance for change, for power, however deeply circumscribed from the point of view of the present.” See *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 37–38.
66 Julian Adolf Święcicki, “Henryk Ibsen,” *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, 1 April 188.
68 Letter, Chłapowski to Gorski, Columbus, Ohio, 3 November 1900, in Got and Szczublewski, *Korespondencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej*, 2:251–53.
Modjeska’s American career neither ended in 1902 nor did she and Chłapowski manage to commission a Polish play for US production at any point. Yet Modjeska in her sixties was more than willing to test out new Polish dramaturgy on the Polish stage. She was prepared to attempt Rydel’s *Na zawsze* (*Forever*), though the author could not finish the play in time for her to premiere it in Lwów. Modjeska did perform in Zapolska’s lyrical patriotic sketch *Jesiennym wieczorem* (*Autumn Evening*) on 2 January 1903, having memorized her part—that of a daughter-in-law who supports the delusions of a sick old man—in just a week. Kotarbiński credited the actress with fleshing out Zapolska’s character in a piece that “was scenically not very interesting.” Zapolska, who was the author of deftly satirical, naturalist dramas (her most famous play, *The Morality of Mrs. Dulski*, exposes middle-class hypocrisy about sexual mores),

---

70 Szczublewski, *Żywot Modrzejewskiej*, 629.
had impressed the actress with her genuine talent and subtlety. But she seemed an unlikely candidate to blend Polish history, gravitas, and “a little comedy” into a vehicle for Modjeska. The intense professional and psychological “sisterhood” Zapolska felt for Modjeska was such that she continued to propose historical themes and ask for cast and staging details from Chłapowski until late April 1903. Nonetheless, her panoramic play never materialized.

In Wyspiański, though, Modjeska was delighted to find a playwright who thoroughly satisfied her Romantic temperament and love of poetry, although she could only advertise and never export his work. Kraków-born and bred, the son of a sculptor, a student of the painter Jan Matejko, and a devotee of Wagner’s operas, Wyspiański emerged as a new sort of theatrical genius, combining visual, verbal, and scenic arts in his dramaturgy and accompanying set and costume designs. The themes and historical periods of his plays ranged widely, but his love-hate relationship with the beautiful and “dead” museum-city of Kraków, reinforced by his classical education, often led him to integrate classical motifs, figures, and dramatic devices into his work. The prolific Wyspiański revolutionized Polish theatre with his bold synthetic approach and the challenging content and form of his plays.

Modjeska’s intensive “working holiday” during 1902–03 presented a fitting final display of the discipline and skills that so distinguished her art. Performing on the three major Polish stages left to her, the actress presented standard repertoire offerings (Mary Stuart, Macbeth, Much Ado About Nothing, Gniazdo rodzinne) and, while spending March 1903 at the Paderewskis’ villa in Morges, Switzerland, threw herself into preparing three new parts for the Kraków stage. The roles she “crammed”—Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Gioconda, Sophocles’ Antigone, and Wyspiański’s Protesilas i Laodamia (Protesilaus and Laodamia)—would be the final additions to her career-long repertoire, a bravura flourish before a reverential public.

Modjeska felt flush with success, as she wrote to her American friend Helena Gilder:

I have played in Austrian Poland and also in Posen (Poznań) and the people received me most kindly. Never in my youth I have met with such enthusiasm. It was almost amusing because I actually walked on flowers. One night my maid counted 280 bouquets, small in size, but very pretty, thrown down upon the stage from boxes, orchestra and even an arrangement has been made with the manager of the theater to let loose flowers rain from the ceiling on my head. It was very pretty and made my heart beat with joy at the thought that my people still like me as much as of old.

Having set herself the monumental goal of mastering three parts in short order, the often-ailing sixty-two-year-old actress had to admit that she might have overestimated
her physical strength. “I’m afraid that these performances may not take place,” she confessed to Kotarbińska,

for my health has begun to fail. From time to time I have a fever, dizziness, and such a bad throat that all this makes learning my parts incredibly difficult. I began with Laodamia and barely memorized up to page 44, it’s such hard going. It’s true that nothing is so difficult as Wyspiański’s language, although it is beautiful and I got to work with great enthusiasm. Antigone is easier, and Gioconda easiest to learn and play. I don’t know, though, if I’ll manage it if my health doesn’t improve.77

The structure of Protesilas i Laodamia also daunted her. Being a widow’s eloquent lament for her husband, the work qualified, according to Feliks Koneczny, as a long poem rather than a drama: “From beginning to end it is truly one enormous monologue. The other characters who appear here and there are of secondary importance, like static figures in a landscape. They serve only to accentuate Laodamia’s thoughts, which are spoken in several voices.”78 Or, as Jan Sten elaborates in his review for the journal Krytyka (Critique), Laodamia, half-awake and half-asleep, “experiences an unprecedented spectrum of feelings: despair, depression, loving melancholy, an audacity to take on anything, rapture in the embrace of her lover-shade, disillusionment leading her to suicide.”79 Protesilas i Laodamia represented a one-woman show, the success of which entirely depended on Modjeska’s virtuosity.

Modjeska’s fears were partly realized on opening night (25 April 1903) when, halfway through Wyspiański’s arduous play, her voice gave out and “she completed the performance in a half whisper.”80 Sten’s review was unusually merciless and disregarded the fact that Modjeska recovered her voice for her two subsequent performances (26 and 28 April): “If it’s still necessary that Mme. Modrzejewska appear onstage, then in no case should she choose roles which demand greater reserves of strength and voice than she possesses.”81 Other critics treated Modjeska more generously, with Koneczny producing the most fulsome appreciation of her efforts: “She interpreted the text incomparably, animating her entire form with light, flowing motions and accentuating thought after thought with incomparable declamation. It was a masterpiece of pose and diction.”82 The critic only laments that there were no technical means to record her voice. (It bears noting here that the one extant photograph of Modjeska live onstage shows her in Protesilas i Laodamia.) Her old admirer Stanisław Witkiewicz, spellbound by her performance, wrote to his son of the “miracle” that Modjeska had wrought, and described a weeping Wyspiański, “for he saw his own soul in the most wondrous figure possible.”83

Modjeska thus departed the Polish stage playing perhaps her most physically and verbally demanding role in the work of a modern Polish playwright whom she ac-

77 Letter, Modjeska to Kotarbińska, Morges, Switzerland, 18 March 1903, in Got and Szczublewski, Korespondencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej, 2:315–16.
80 Szczublewski, Życie Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, 638.
81 “J.S.,” “Przegląd teatralny,” 400. In Dramaty Stanisława Wyspiańskiego na scenie do 1939 (Warszawa: Semper, 1994), Roman Taborski also judges Sten’s review to be unfair because the critic was writing for a monthly, but generalized on the basis of one night’s attendance (58).
83 Piasecki, Stanisław Witkiewicz, 176.
knowledged “a master.” She nonetheless refused the offers presented to her in 1902 and 1903 to assume joint direction of the Lwów and Kraków theatres, an invitation for her to “rest on her laurels, enjoy some peace and quiet, and ponder the magnificence of ‘The Modrzejewska Imperial Theaters,’ which would mean the renaissance of the Polish theatre.” Nor did she respond to Koneczny’s heartfelt suggestion, included in the issues of Przegląd polski (Polish Review) he sent her, that she establish a theatre school so as to pass along her expertise to future generations of actors and ensure “the crowning glory of her life.”

Offstage, however, the visiting Modjeska—now a wealthy private person—labored tirelessly for Polish theatre and society. While theatre critics charged her with neglecting the long-term revival of the Polish stage, city fathers, local aristocrats, and scores of charitable organizations praised her civic spirit and generosity whenever she appeared. Each return tour, especially after the five-year hiatus between 1885 and 1890, raised the bar for Modjeska’s national service, as her decision to repatriate seemed less likely and her managerial acumen increased after years performing in the United States. Her 1890–91 Polish tour proved to be particularly grueling, as she traveled from Poznań to Lwów to Kraków to Warsaw and even to Łódź. In Kraków, for example, her benefit performances and appearances for such charities as the Jagiellonian University Student Mutual Aid Society, the Sokol Gymnastic Society, and the Reading Room for Polish Catholic Youth multiplied to the point that Czas was moved to commend her achievements offstage: “Madame Modrzejewska not only favors us with one of her incomparable artistic creations almost every evening, but also finds the time and strength to support charitable or useful institutions with her talent.” In fact, her self-imposed service likely caused the irrepressible actress to faint during the fifth act of The Lady of the Camellias toward the end of her Kraków stay. Needless to say, Modjeska played again the following night.

Fulfilling her national duties in short bursts of intensive activity while denying Poland her long-term presence as a master teacher or theatre director, Modjeska invested financially in Polish theatre-building as she did not in America. As early as February 1880, she had pledged the earnings from her six performances in Poznań—an enormous sum of 6,000 marks—to a local widowed actress and the city’s theatre. In this strictly Germanized city, where Poles were arguably the most oppressed by their occupiers, Modjeska boldly proclaimed the theatre as a means of polonization after her final performance in 1890:

By playing in Poznań I aimed to awaken your fellow feeling for the noble and ardent work which you see everyday on this stage, work mainly undertaken to preserve the jewel of our people—the Polish language. It’s well-known under what circumstances this theater arose and what difficulties it encounters in this locale. So here I am, a daughter of this

---

84 Quoted from Kazimierz Skrzyński’s letter to Modjeska, Lwów, 21 December 1902, in Got and Szczublewski, Korespondencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej, 2:294–95.
85 Koneczny, “Teatr krakowski,” Przegląd polski 9, t. 147, no. 441 (March 1903): 569.
86 Czas, 19 December 1890.
87 Czas, 20 December 1890.
88 Letter, Franciszek Dobrowolski to Modjeska, Poznań, 26 January 1880, in Got and Szczublewski, Korespondencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej, 2:483–84. Szczublewski remarks that Modjeska gave “six times the amount given by any single member of the local aristocracy” (Szczublewski, Życiół Modrzejewskiej, 303).
land, your sister come from distant parts. Taking advantage of your kindness, I implore you: Support the Polish theater.  

Her return visits to Poznań swelled this support quite phenomenally. According to actor-eyewitness Stefan Turski (1875–1946), Modjeska’s final Poznań tour in 1903 prompted “great patriotic manifestations . . . the Prussian police were helpless or perhaps ordered to look the other way.” City traffic revolved or halted around the star: “Hundreds of carriages brought patrons to each performance and the trams had to be stopped. Reinforced police posts kept order on the street where tens of thousands who could not get tickets waited for the great artist to appear.”

Modjeska participated more extensively in erecting a new Kraków theatre. Since the 1870s, the city government had been contemplating the construction of a new building to replace the increasingly inadequate theatre that Modjeska had known since her youth. Acknowledging that “this idea had been germinating in the minds of all right-thinking citizens who love our nation’s art,” the actress launched large-scale fundraising for the project by donating the earnings of the last two performances of her 1884 Kraków season. During her 1890 tour, she and Chłapowski made news

---

89 Czas, 4 November 1890.
91 Czas, 24 December 1884; also published as Modjeska’s letter of the same date to the Redakcja (editorial board) of Czas, in Got and Szczublewski, Korespondencje Heleny Modrzejewskiej, 2:62–64.
by asking to look over the new theatre’s design.\textsuperscript{92} Savvy about best theatre-building practices from their US tours, the couple strongly suggested that the architect add “a combined hall for the actors and rehearsal space” and make the stage deeper by two meters to facilitate scenery changes.\textsuperscript{93} Approximately six months later, in early June 1891, Modjeska, together with her old Kraków rival Antonina Hoffmann, laid the first brick of the new theatre to commence construction.\textsuperscript{94} By the time of her 1894–95 and 1902–03 Polish tours, Modjeska could perform in the new, splendid City Theatre (it was renamed after Słowacki only in 1909) on the Square of the Holy Ghost, a building designed by architect Jan Zawiejski that was based on other sumptuous fin-de-siècle opera houses and adorned by the frescoes of Viennese artist Anton Tuch and with a stage curtain by the famed Polish painter Henryk Siemiradzki. Modjeska thus exited Poland as both artistic pioneer and philanthropist, a mature artist who performed a spellbinding one-woman show by Poland’s greatest playwright on the magnificent new stage that her contributions helped to create (fig. 6).

Modjeska’s gambit in quitting Poland and variously playing the patriot paid off handsomely in the Polish receptions that grew warmer, more sentimentalized, and ritualized because of longer separations and the passing years. She became an ever-more beloved national icon who steadfastly incarnated Polish greatness overseas and lavished both artistic and material riches upon her people during her self-sacrificing return visits. Her countrymen gratefully reciprocated with continual ovations of the sort that she “never met [with] in [her] youth,” cherishing her performances regardless of her age and accommodating her new repertoire despite its maximal ensemble effort and limited stage life. Cocooned in a stable, well-controlled relationship of infrequent contact and mutual idealization, Modjeska could assure her American public of her concomitant Polish reign, her exceptional double stardom: “Faces not seen for years, faithful eyes and friendly, smiling lips, shaking of hands, words of hearty welcome—all this fills me with joy, warms me, intoxicates me. The lapse of years spent far away from the country shrinks into nothingness; I am again with my own people as of old, and they are the same, unchanged and true! I am happy!”\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{92} Czas, 18 December 1890.
\textsuperscript{93} Czas, 19 December 1890.
\textsuperscript{94} Szczublewski, Żywot Modrzejewskiej, 525.
\textsuperscript{95} Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 7.