

HELENA MODJESKA (MODRZEJEWSKA) - THE CLUB'S PATRON



Portrait of Helena Modrzejewska by Tadeusz Ajdukiewicz, 1880 (fragment).

The patron of Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club in Los Angeles, Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska) was a Shakespearean actress born in Krakow, Poland, on October 12, 1840 (as Jadwiga Benda); who emigrated to California in 1870s, settled on an estate in Orange County (that she called Arden) and died in Newport Beach, California, on April 8, 1909. The following biographical entry by Maja Trochimczyk is partly based on one written by Krystyna Cap for *The Polish American Encyclopedia*, edited by James Pula and published by McFarland in 2011. Used by permission. For more information about the Encyclopedia see the [PDF flyer](#) or visit [McFarland Publishing website](#). (The two main errors in that biography include the fact that Modjeska was not married to Sinnmayer, and the reasons for emigration).



Helena Modjeska in her roles as Juliet (Romeo and Juliet), and as Barbara Radziwillowna (1867), Vintage postcards published in Poland. Photographs from Wikimedia Commons.

Although her paternity has been contested by claims that Modjeska was illegitimately fathered by Prince Wladyslaw Sanguszko, Modjeska was born into a family that traveled in artistic circles. Her mother, Józefa (Misel) Benda (1803-October 21, 1887), was the widow of merchant Szymon Benda (1770-1835), and Modjeska was born as Jadwiga Benda but later baptized as Helena Opid, with the surname of her godfather, music teacher Michael Opid. Despite their relative poverty, from a young age Modjeska was influenced by her adopted musician father, Michal, and his literary and artistic friends.

Around 1860 she started a relationship with Gustave Sinnmayer Modrzejewski (1825-1901) a much older theater director, actor and manager of a troupe touring provincial Galicia. This was not a formal marriage but they presented it as such. Sinnmayer used the name "Modrzejewski" on stage and thus, Helena's Polish stage name was born, "Modrzejewska" with the feminine ending "a" instead of "i" used for men. Sinnmayer supervised her early education and promoted her fledgling acting career. In 1861 she made her first onstage appearance in a one-act comedy named *The White Camellia*. In the same year, Modjeska had a son with Sinnmayer, Rudolf (1861-1940) (later known as Ralph Modjeski), who became a civil engineer in the United States, and a daughter who died as a baby.

After separating from her "husband" (she claimed that Sinnmayer, her first husband, died in 1866, though, being born in 1825, he lived to 1901), Modjeska continued her career in Poland, remarrying in 1868. Her official second and actual first husband, Count Karol Bozenta Chlapowski, was a well-known Polish patriot and journalist from a noble family. Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, she continued to receive critical acclaim for her various roles on the Warsaw stage, she also performed in Krakow and Lwow, where her appearances were greeted with enthusiasm by audiences and envy by local starlets.



Modjeska as Ophelia from *Hamlet*, Rosalind from *As You Like It* and Adrienne.

In the years prior to emigration, she and her husband briefly traveled to Krakow, where Chlapowski published a partisan journal and where Helena became somewhat active in Polish politics. Upon return to Warsaw, the radical nationalist position held by both Modrzejewska

and Chlapowski resulted in increasing harassment by Russian authorities, and led the pair to leave Warsaw for America in 1876. There were other reasons for her emigration; among them, seeking a larger stage for her talent, performing Shakespeare in English, and leaving behind the small, oppressive and full of intrigues theatrical world of partitioned Poland.

Thus, Helena Modrzejewska migrated to California with her son from her first marriage, Ralph (later a well-respected civil engineer, designer and builder of many bridges that still stand), her husband Count Bozena Chlapowski, and a handful of Polish friends and colleagues, including Julian Sypniewski and Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Modrzejewska and her husband purchased a twenty-acre farm in Anaheim, established a ranch there, and with their Polish friends, intended to found a utopian Polish farming colony. Already in Poland she took English lessons and studied Shakespeare in English. When farming plans failed owing to a lack of agricultural knowledge, and plain bad luck (weather), the actress traveled to San Francisco, with the intention of returning to the stage. Not long after, with the assistance of several Poles resident in San Francisco, she approached Barton Hill and John McCullough of the California Theater for a role. It was McCullough who suggested that she shorten her name to Modjeska to make it easier for American audiences to pronounce. On August 20, 1877, Modjeska made her American debut in San Francisco in an Ernest Legouve and A. E. Scribe play, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

Achieving critical acclaim for her successive roles, including Ophelia and Juliet, she soon began touring American stages in a variety of roles, appearing in Boston, Buffalo, Kansas City, New Orleans, New York, and elsewhere. She was a star, director, producer, costume designer and maker, and publicist of these tours of ensembles that included the whole cast and supporting staff and traveled on special trains, where they also lived. The grueling schedule of the tours consisted of travel by night, and daily performances for 20 to 30 weeks, without breaks, with 8 to 9 performances each week (including matinees and evenings on weekends).

In 1878 Modjeska briefly toured theaters in Russian Poland and traveled to England in 1880. Upon her return to America in 1882, she produced and starred in a version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In America, Modjeska became famous chiefly for her portrayal of several Shakespearean roles, including Juliet, Desdemona, Rosalind, Queen Anne, and Ophelia. She played Juliet until she was 47 years old; but her longest-performed Shakespearean role was of Lady Macbeth that she performed fragments of in various appearances even after her official retirement from the stage.

In May 1893, she was invited to speak at an international conference at the Chicago World's Fair, where she delivered a stirring speech on the status of Polish women, uttering several highly patriotic remarks regarding the injustice of Poland's eighteenth-century partitions. In Russia her speech met with the ire of tsarist authorities, who issued an ukase prohibiting her from ever returning to Russian Poland.



Modjeska's home "Arden" in Silverado Canyon, Orange County in 1910 (vintage postcard) and in 2011 with actress Ewa Boryczko as Modjeska and Maja Trochimczyk. The property is now a Historic Home owned by Orange County and partly supported by the Helena Modjeska Foundation.

Modjeska was a doting grandmother and took care not only of her grandchildren but also of various cousins and relatives from Poland. She often visited the family of her son Ralph Modjeski that moved around the country, following his engineering assignments. She even wrote and illustrated a tale for her grandson Felix Bozenta Modjeski - handwritten in Polish and English with lovely watercolor illustrations, the book consisted of 147 pages, and was given to the boy for Christmas in 1896. The story of two boys, Titi, Nunu, and their six-legged blue dog Klembolo is filled with dramatic and scary adventures, in the mode of the time, when children were raised by fear, rather than affection. All ends well, as the kids return home unharmed and taught a lesson about good behavior. The tale is now in the collection of University of California, Irvine. The illustrations reveal another side of Modjeska, not just that of a writer and artist, but also of a botanist and gardener: the images accurately portray many native plants.

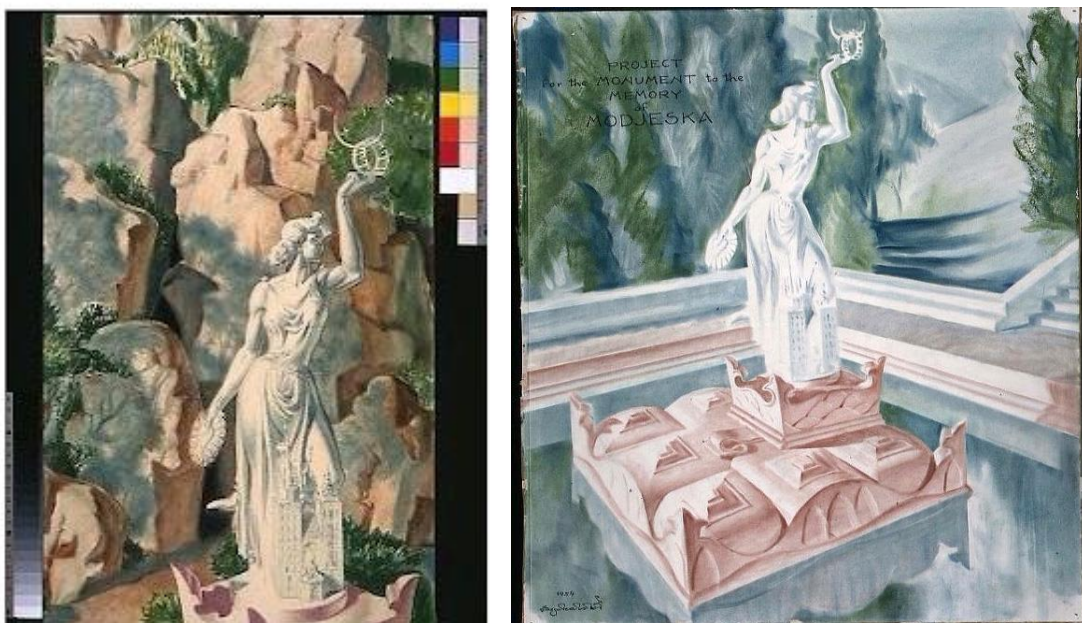
After spending over 20 years on her beloved estate, Arden, in Silverado Canyon, Orange County, California (see the photographs above), Count and Countess Bozenta Chlapowski moved to Tustin and then purchased a home on Bay Island in Newport Beach, California where Modjeska died in 1909. After her death, Chlapowski returned to Poland and buried her remains in Krakow, Poland. He died in 1916. In 1911, her memoirs were published in America and thereafter translated into Polish. Throughout her career, Modjeska played in over 225 towns and cities throughout the United States and Canada.

In popular culture, Modjeska inspired Susan Sontag's novel, *In America* (1999), which was awarded the National Book Award. Sontag's novel was based on Modjeska's life after emigration and came under public scrutiny for allegedly having plagiarized passages from Modjeska's own memoir and other biographical sources. A collection of primary and secondary materials on Modjeska's career in Poland and the United States is housed in the

Special Collections and Archives of the University of California, Irvine. UC Irvine recently purchased a copy of a fairy tale written and illustrated by Modjeska for her grandson Felix Bozenta Modjeski.

Another collection of four boxes of documents, photographs, and some material artefacts has recently been purchased by the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA. According to the website, the collection "contains correspondence, photographs, and ephemera of Polish actress Helena Modjeska (1840-1909) and members of the family of Ludwik Opid (1865-1948), whom Modjeska considered to be a nephew, dating from 1869-1982. The bulk of the materials consists of correspondence, in Polish, between members of the Opid family in Poland and Ludwik Opid in Los Angeles, California, dating from the 1910s-1940s."

MODJESKA CLUB AND MODJESKA



Monument design by Stanislaw Szukalski

The Modjeska Club has tried to erect a monument to Modjeska since the 1970s. At that time, the Club's member eminent sculptor Stanislaw Szukalski made one design of Modjeska as a flamenco dancer, with raised hands, above a tiny Marian Basilica from Krakow. This project was never realized and only the color water color of the design remains.

In the 1990s, Tomasz Misztal was asked to design a monument that was to be placed near Modjeska's last residence in Orange County. Two designs were made as clay models and photographed. One was based on the portrait by Ajdukiewicz, with Modjeska in a Victorian dress holding a book, and another was based on a stage photograph of Modjeska in costume. See the photos of the monument designs: [Monuments PDF](#).



Monument designs by Tomasz Misztal

In 2010, to honor its patron and recognize acting talent of Polish actors, the Modjeska Club created the Helena Modjeska Prize for the Most Eminent Polish Actor. The prize was first presented to Jan Nowicki in 2010, then to Anna Dymna in 2011, and to Barbara Krafftówna in 2012. The prize was discontinued in the years 2013-2017; the 2018 prize was presented to Jadwiga Baranska. In 2019 the awardees were Agata Pilitowska and Maria Nowotarska of the Polish Theater in Toronto. For the year 2020, the prize was given to Andrzej Seweryn and in the 50th anniversary year, the prize was presented to Jan Englert and Beata Pozniak. The in-person presentations of the Modjeska Prize to Seweryn and Englert are yet to take place; the events were conducted virtually on Zoom.



Maja Trochimczyk presents Modjeska Prize to Barbara Krafftówna. Prize for Baranska.



Maja Trochimczyk and Anna Dymna, recipient of the 2011 Modjeska Prize. Krakow, June 2012.



The 2018 Prize for Jadwiga Baranska,, December 15, 2018, Christmas Party at McGoarty Arts Center in Tujunga, CA



Maja Trochimczyk and Anna Sadowska present the 2020 Modjeska Prize to Andrzej Seweryn (online).



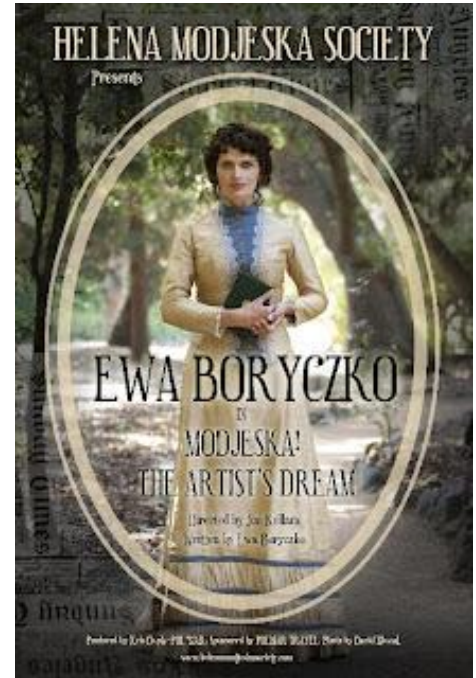
The 2019 Modjeska Prize for Agata Pilitowska and Maria Nowotarska, January 31, 2020. LtoR: Chris Justin, Dr. Elzbieta Trybus, Maja Trochimczyk, Beata Czajkowska, Anna Sadowska, Elzbieta Przybyla, Ewa Barsam, Konsul Pawel Lickiewicz. Seated: Agata Pilitowska and Maria Nowotarska. Magicopolis, Santa Monica



Maja Trochimczyk, Beata Pozniak, Marek Probosz, and Consul Pawel Lickiewicz present Modjeska Prizes to Beata Pozniak (in person) and Jan Englert (virtually) at 50th Anniversary Ball of the Club, October 10, 2021, Pasadena University Club, Pasadena



In the 2000s, several Modjeska-themed events took place at the Club. Barbara Myszynska presented her documentary "Woman Triumphant" about the life and career of the great actress. In 2011-12, the Modjeska Club sponsored performances by Ewa Boryczko in a play about Helena Modjeska that was performed at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, and also, a fragment, during the 40th Anniversary Gala of the Club at Morningside Club House in Brentwood. The performer wore replicas of Modjeska costumes from the collection of Chris Cieply, an Orange County businessman and collector of all things Modjeska. In 2011, the Modjeska Club sponsored a lecture by Professor Beth Holmgren based on her new biography of Modjeska

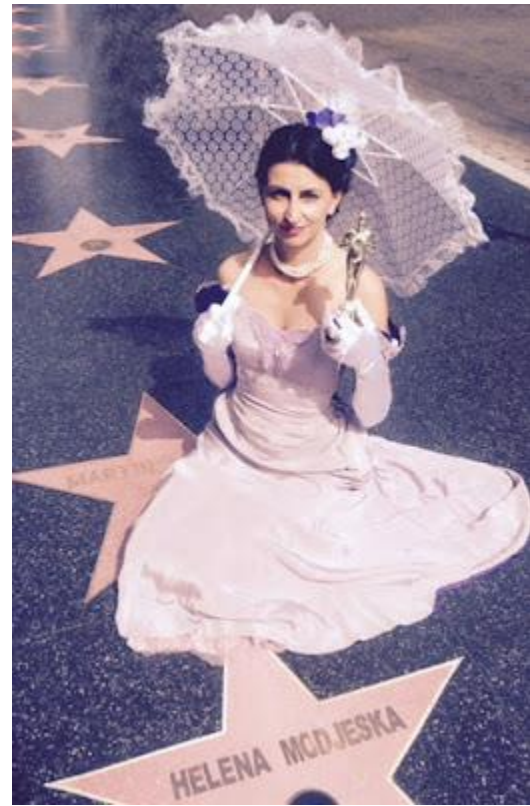


and held at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana. *Cover of Beth Holmgren's Book and Ewa Boryczko as Helena Modjeska*

On March 28, 2019 Maja Trochimczyk, President of Modjeska Club gave a lecture "Who was Helena Modjeska?" at the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach, to accompany the exhibit of Modjeska's tale for her grandson first time on display after its conservation by the new owner of the rare manuscript, University of California at Irvine, Special Collections.



Modjeska Club at Laguna Art Museum, lecture by Maja Trochimczyk, March 2019.



In 2019, the Modjeska Club presented the world premiere of a new play by Marta Ojrzyńska, "Helena" at Magicopolis Theater on May 19. The author wrote: "The play HELENA is a story about a woman outstanding, liberated, beautiful, important, with great ambitions. This artist, who was the first Polish theater star in the nineteenth century, went abroad and achieved a stunning success. It is a story about art, difficult family life, struggling for survival, huge determination, success, love but also great loneliness. Marta Ojrzyńska writes: "I am trying to answer the question of who a great actress would be today and where her artistic path led her then, to succeed in England and America, and where it would have led now ..." Screenplay and direction was by Marta Ojrzyńska who also starred in the play, designed the costumes. The lighting and video design was by Bartosz Nalazek. More information, biographies and photos of artists: <https://modjeskaclub.blogspot.com/2019/04/world-premiere-of-helena-by-marta.html>

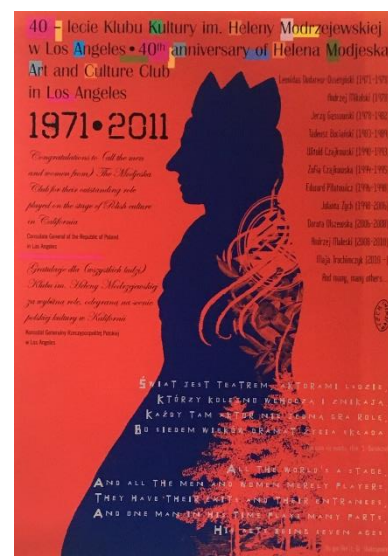
SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- This entry by Krystyna Cap is reprinted from *The Polish American Encyclopedia*, edited by James Pula, McFarland Publishing, 2011. Used by Permission. More information about the Encyclopedia is [here](#).
- Ellen K. Lee, "The Catholic Modjeska," *Polish American Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (1974), 20-27;
- "Helena Modjeska," in Charles H. Shattuck, ed., *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From Booth and Barrett to Sothorn and Marlowe* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987), Vol. 2, 125-36

- Arthur P. Coleman and Marion Moore Coleman, *Wanderers Twain: Modjeska and Sienkiewicz. A View of California* (Cheshire: Cherry Hill Books, 1964)
- Marion Moore Coleman, *Fair Rosalind: The American Career of Helena Modjeska* (Sheshire: Cherry Hill Books, 1969)
- Antoni Gronowicz, *Modjeska: Her Life and Loves* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956)
- Helena Modjeska, *Memories and Impressions of Helena Modjeska: An Autobiography* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969)
- Beth Holmgren, "Virility and Gentility: How Sienkiewicz and Modjeska Redeemed America," *The Polish Review*, Vol. 46, no. 3 (2001), 283-96
- Beth Holmgren, *Starring Madame Modjeska: On Tour in Poland and America* (Indiana University Press, 2011)
- Susan Sontag, *In America* (Faber and Faber, 2000)

MODJESKA ARCHIVES

- Modjeska Opid Family Papers at Huntington Library, San Marino:
- <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8xw4r2c/>. The Library also holds various individual letters to and from Modjeska in other California collections.
- Helena Modjeska Papers at Special Collections, University of Californi, Irvine
- Ellen Lee Papers at Special Collections, University of California, Irvine (Ellen Lee was former president of Helena Modjeska Foundation in Orange County, that took care of Arden, Modjeska home, now the property of the county)
- Albums of Art given to Modjeska, Orchard Lake College



MODJESKA LINKS



- [Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club in Los Angeles](#)
- [Helena Modjeska Foundation \(Orange County\)](#)
- [Helena Modjeska Society \(Orange County\)](#)
- [Arden - Modjeska Historic House \(Orange County\)](#)
- [Modjeska Playhouse Theater in Orange County](#)
- [Modjeska Woman Triumphant - Documentary](#)
- [Story in OC Register about Arden \(2017\)](#)

*Modjeska Poster for 40th anniversary of the Club, by Lech Majewski of Poland.
Image from 2012 Modjeska Christmas Songbook designed by Maja Trochimczyk*