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The Mystery of Helena Modjeska's First and Last Kraków Photographs

The Walery Rzewuski's and Józef Sebald's Glass Negatives in the Jagiellonian Library Collection

Abstract

The article focuses on a unique collection of glass negatives held at the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków. These works by the esteemed Polish photographers Walery Rzewuski (1865–1869) and Józef Sebald (1903) capture the actress Helena Modjeska in her first and last photographic sessions in her hometown. In 2024, the negatives were dignitized for the first time at the Museum of Photography in Kraków, so that digital copies identical to the originals were obtained. By reconstructing the history of the relationship between the actress and Rzewuski based on various sources, the

article examines the phenomenon of Modjeska's earliest photographs in character and investigates the talent of one of the first Polish theatre photographers. Inspired by Geoffrey Batchen's *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (2021), the author attempts to demonstrate how examining negatives can shift our perspective on the understanding of photography, including theatre photography.

Keywords

Helena Modjeska, Walery Rzewuski, theatre photography, 19th century, history of photography, glass negative, actor's craft

Abstrakt

Tajemnica pierwszych i ostatnich krakowskich fotografii Heleny Modrzejewskiej: Szklane negatywy Walerego Rzewuskiego i Józefa Sebalda w zbiorach Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej

Artykuł dotyczy unikalnej kolekcji szklanych negatywów przechowywanych w zbiorach Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej w Krakowie. Zawiera ona prace cenionych polskich fotografów: Walerego Rzewuskiego z lat 1865–1869 oraz Józefa Sebalda z 1903, połączone postacią aktorki Heleny Modrzejewskiej uwiecznionej w jej pierwszych i ostatnich sesjach fotograficznych w rodzinnym mieście. W 2024 negatywy zostały po raz pierwszy zdigitalizowane w Muzeum Fotografii w Krakowie, co pozwoliło na uzyskanie cyfrowych kopii identycznych z oryginałami. Rekonstruując historię relacji między aktorką a fotografem na podstawie materiałów źródłowych, autorka bada fenomen pierwszych fotografii Modrzejewskiej w rolach teatralnych i próbuje odkryć tajemnicę talentu Walerego Rzewuskiego jako jednego z pionierów fotografii teatralnej. Inspiracją dla analizy jest książka Geoffreya Batchena *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (2021), która pozwala wskazać, jak uwzględnienie negatywów może zmienić perspektywę postrzegania fotografii, także fotografii teatralnej.

Słowa kluczowe

Helena Modrzejewska, Walery Rzewuski, fotografia teatralna, XIX wiek, historia fotografii, szklany negatyw, aktorstwo

The Special Collections of the Jagiellonian Library Kraków holds fifty glass negatives by Walery Rzewuski from 1865–1869 and six by Józef Sebald from 1903.[1] The link between the negatives is Helena Modrzejewska (known on the American stage as Helena Modjeska).[2] This is a remarkable collection, especially for aficionados of the history of photography and theatre. So far as we know, these are the only existing glass negatives of Polish theatre photography in the collections.[3] In 2024, the negatives were digitized at the Museum of Photography in Kraków, and now we can look at digital files of the negatives in the best available quality.[4]

Helena Modjeska (1840–1909) was a leading light of the American and Polish stages. On the cover of her book *Fair Rosalind: The American Career of Helena Modjeska*, Marion Coleman aptly summed up her American career of the period 1877–1907:

> Modjeska co-starred with Edwin Booth and had the founder of the Barrymore dynasty, Maurice, for several seasons as her leading man. For thirty years she gave pleasure and high artistic experience to American theatregoers, and her career was one of the noble moments in the history of the American stage.[5]

[1] Jagiellonian Library Kraków, Special Collection, BJ Graf. I.F.17127–17187.

[2] In the article, the author uses both forms of the surname: Modrzejewska and Modjeska.

[3] Studies on Polish theatre photography collections are part of an art studies field that is still in its infancy. In December 2024, the first virtual retrospective exhibition, *Theatre Memory: Polish Theatre Photography from the Beginning Until the Present*, was launched. I am the curator of the first part, covering the years 1839–1918; https://pamiecteatru.pl/en/home. Collecting and describing collections of Polish theatre photography has a tradition going back to 1847. See Agnieszka Wanicka, "'I Was Swayed by This Thought': The Story of a Photography Project by Michał Chomiński That Never Came to Be," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 70, no. 1 (2021): 37–73, https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.718.

[4] This digitization was carried out through the Minigrants POB Heritage project (special edition: Digital Humanities) *The Photography Collection of the Kraków Roles of Helena Modrzejewska: The Digitization of Glass Negatives from 1865–69*, supervised by Agnieszka Wanicka, at the Polish Studies Faculty of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. I came across the collection of Rzewuski's glass negatives in 2018 in a book on him and his theatre photographs. See Wanda Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski (1837–1888) fotograf: Studium warsztatu i twórczości* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, 1981), 161–173. In 2019, I published a detailed catalogue of the negatives, "54 portrety aktorki na szkle: Katalog szklanych negatywów Walerego Rzewuskiego w zbiorach Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej w Krakowie," in *Helena Modrzejewska i teatr jej epoki*, ed. Alicja Kędziora and Emil Orzechowski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Pracowni Dokumentacji Życia i Twórczości Heleny Modrzejewskiej i Fundacji dla Modrzejewskiej, 2019), 101–111.

[5] Marion Coleman, *Fair Rosalind: The American Career of Helena Modjeska* (Connecticut: Cherry Hill Books, 1969). The nineteenth-century actor, an exponent of Shakespeare, continues to inspire contemporary theatre scholars, and the bibliography on her work is expanded every year with new studies. Of the most recent ones for the English-language reader, there are: Agata Łuksza, *Polish Theatre Revisited: Theatre Fans in the Nineteenth Century* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2024) and Agnieszka Wanicka, "'They Were Devouring Her with Their Eyes': Some Remarks on the Warsaw Experience in the Life and Work of Helena Modrzejewska," *Didaskalia: Gazeta Teatralna*, English Issue (2022), 229–256, https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/they-were-devouring-her-their-eyes.

Embarking on her career in San Francisco at the age of thirty-seven, Modjeska was a conscious and mature artist. She took with her the experiences of seven years working in the Warsaw Theatres ensemble (1869–1876), where she played some outstanding tragic roles in her beloved Shakespearean repertoire (including Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Desdemona in *Othello*), and before that, four years in the Kraków Theatre ensemble (1865–1869) and four years on provincial stages (1861–1865) with a stint at the Skarbkowski Theatre in Lwów [presently Lviv, Ukraine]. She stood out with her awareness of her own acting technique, as well as her conscious way of shaping her theatre career. In the Polish theatre, operating in the unusual circumstances of a country that was partitioned and wiped off the map until 1918, there was no such thing as an actors' agent. Modjeska was the first Polish actor to manage her stage image, using the new medium of photography. Born on October 12, 1840 as Helena Misel (Modrzejewska, and later Modjeska, are stage names), she was only a year old when photography was officially born. She grew up alongside the development of this invention, submitting, as the title of Elizabeth Ann McCauley's book has it, to the *Industrial Madness* of the epoch in which she lived.[6] When she began a new stage of her career in the United States in 1877, she was also an artist with experience posing for the camera. She gained even more working with America's finest photographers and during her guest appearances in England. She took to the studio to reprise her major roles in stage costume.[7] In New York, she was most often photographed in the studio of Napoleon Sarony and José Mora, and in London in the studio of Wiliam and Daniel Downey. Her photographs in character are in the greatest photography collections, including the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. We also know that she took photographs herself. In 1886 she wrote to her husband, Karol Chłapowski:

> I'm learning a role, painting and considering a new profession—photography. I want to buy a machine, or rather, a camera. It will give us a great deal of enjoyment in California. I'll take pictures of all the cows and calves in the canyon.[8]

[6] Elizabeth Ann McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[7] Photographic documentation of Helena Modjeska is explored by Alicja Kędziora of the Foundation for Support of Modjeska's Life and Art Research, a scholar and author of many valuable publications. In 2015, she published a photo book documenting all the actor's Shakespearean roles. See Alicja Kędziora, ed., *Modjeska's Shakespeare* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Pracowni Dokumentacji Życia i Twórczości Heleny Modrzejewskiej i Fundacji dla Modrzejewskiej, 2015).

[8] Letter from Helena Modjeska to Karol Chłapowski dated March 8, 1886, letter no. 511, in *Modrzejewska/Listy 1*, ed. Alicja Kędziora and Emil Orzechowski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2015), 718. Quoted in:

In letters to her family two and three years later, she provided more details:

> I'm sending you photographs I have developed. One of them was taken by my friend, but I developed them both. The matte prints are the best, it is a new invention to make a photograph look like a drawing. I have a camera and prepare the developing chemicals myself. It is quite fun, though time-consuming.[9]

> I did a bit of photography in the summer, and as soon as I have time, I'll make a few prints for you. Right now I don't have anything nice, because I sent the Dolcis [her son and daughter-in-law] everything I have.[10]

It is no accident that Susan Sontag, creating the character of Maryna, was inspired by Helena Modjeska in the novel *In America,* including a scene of her posing for a photograph. Maryna and her friends pose on the farm for Mrs. Eiza Withington's camera. The photographer immediately recognizes that Maryna has experience. "You have posed for the photographer many times, have you?" she asks. When Maryna says yes, she adds: "I thought so. The moment before I uncapped my lens, you arched your eyebrows ever so slightly, which elongated the oval of your cheeks. I like it when people know what they're doing. Were you ever on the stage?"[11] Through her ability to pose, Maryna is recognized as having been an actor. Later, recalling her posing, Maryna says:

> I felt natural to be photographed as an actress, in the costume of one of my roles. I knew what I was supposed to do for the camera, and how I wanted to look. Today I was posing in a void. Pretending to offer something. Playing at being photographed.[12]

Judging by the number of photos of the actress in costume, Sontag perfectly captured a characteristic of Modrzejewska, who felt more natural posing in stage costumes and performing theatrical roles than in private. Like Sarah Bernhardt, Modrzejewska is regarded as an icon of nineteenth-century theatre,

Anna Litak, "Fotografie Modrzejewskiej," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 58, no. 3/4 (2009): 384. The same publication has many interesting remarks on photography in the actor's life and work.

9 Letter from Helena Modjeska to Józefa and Leon Kozakiewicz dated December 30, 1888, letter no. 558, in *Modrzejewska/Listy 2*, ed. Alicja Kędziora and Emil Orzechowski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2015), 34.

10 Letter from Helena Modjeska to Anna Wolska dated April 7, 1889, letter no. 563, in *Modrzejewska/Listy 2*, 41.

11 Susan Sontag, *In America* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 191–192.

12 Sontag, *In America*, 195.

having gained popularity through the rapid development of photography. The digitization of glass negatives showing the actress's earliest role photographs provided an opportunity to explore the origins of Modrzejewska's passion for photography—specifically, who her first photographer was and what influence he might have had on linking her theatrical career with photography.

Helena Modjeska and Walery Rzewuski

In the Polish press in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the first reflections on photographs of actors in their roles, recreating their stage characters in the studio, voiced the conviction that good theatre photography was essentially the conjunction of two artists, one behind the camera and one in front of it. "But to take this kind of photographs [i.e. theatrical ones] it is not enough to own a camera, a bit of collodion, and other ingredients. To take artistic shots you must be an artist yourself," we read in the *Kurier Warszawski* in 1871.[13] The intersection of two artists, an actor and a photographer, is key to understanding Helena Modjeska's first theatre photographs.

Walery Rzewuski was not much older than Modejska, being born in Kraków in 1837.[14] Both were of the generation when photography was invented. They had similar social origins. Helena's mother, Józefa Benda, was the widow of Szymon Benda, a merchant and the owner of two corner buildings on Grodzka Street and Dominikański Square. Walery was the son of a merchant, Mikołaj, and Józefa, née Szyszkowska; he and his family lived in the building on Grodzka Street 30. Emil Orzechowski, a scholar of the actor's life and work, believes they may have even been related. Only a few dozen meters separated their flats. The search for evidence of their close and heartfelt relations takes us to Modjeska's letter from later years, from May 8, 1867, to be precise, which concludes with: "I don't wish to overstay my welcome, though I have plenty more to say–but in three weeks I will be in Kraków, so I'll tell all, as usual."[15] Both were fascinated by the theatre. Helena Misel chose theatre as a profession, as did Modrzejewska, following her

[13] *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 91 (1871): 2.

[14] For the biographies of Helena Modrzejewska and Walery Rzewuski, I consulted: Emil Orzechowski, *Helena Modrzejewska: Biogram* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Pracowni Dokumentacji Życia i Twórczości Heleny Modrzejewskiej i Fundacji dla Modrzejewskiej, 2017); Jerzy Koziński, "Rzewuski Walery," *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. XXIV (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1992–1993), 183–185; Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski;* Antoni Kleczkowski, *Walery Rzewuski. Obywatel m. Krakowa, Radca miejski: Rys jego życia i działalności publicznej na podstawie dokumentów i zebranych materjałów* (Kraków, 1895).

[15] Letter from Helena Modrzejewska to Walery Rzewuski, dated ca. May 8, 1867, letter no. 16, in *Modrzejewska/Listy 1*, 65.

stage debut in Bochnia in 1861, much like her half-siblings. In 1851–1856, Walery Rzewuski studied chemistry at the Technical Institute in Kraków, but he always had a fondness for theatre. Antoni Kleczkowski wrote:

> One of the young student's great pleasures was attending theatre, as well as a vital and enduring interest in literature and the dramatic arts, though not to the degree that it had a negative impact on his studies or his school obligations.[16]

Rzewuski did not just frequently attend the Kraków Theatre on Szczepański Square (presently the Helena Modrzejewska National Stary Theatre!), he also knew the theatre from his own stage practice. He appeared in amateur theatre and was co-author of the statute of the Amateur Theatre Society in 1852.[17] In the 1857/58 academic year he picked up his studies in Vienna, where he grew interested in photography, and decided to commit his professional life to the new medium. He took leave of his studies due to health problems (Rzewuski suffered from heart disease all his life) and returned to Kraków. In 1859 he began taking pictures, as one scholar of his work puts it, "on a wider scale."[18]

Investigating the biographies of the photographer and the actor, we note that around 1860 a major breakthrough in each of their careers took place; their roads diverged, and when again they crossed paths in 1865, they both had quite different statuses in their professions. Helena had become the prima donna of the Kraków Theatre, and Walery the owner of the largest and most popular photo studio in town. We should look at the most important facts from this five-year period.

In 1860,[19] Walery founded his first studio in his family home on Grodzka Street 30. He took photos in the courtyard, and developed them in a little room on the third floor, where he set up a modest laboratory. The next year, he moved to a small home on Krupnicza Street 5, which he turned into a photo studio. Financial success soon followed, allowing him to move once more. In 1862 he opened a new and larger photo studio on Kopernika Street 12. It had separate living quarters, laboratory, workshop, changing rooms, and a spacious studio

[16] Kleczkowski, *Walery Rzewuski*, 11.

[17] Kleczkowski.

[18] Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski*, 10.

[19] I join Wanda Mossakowska in accepting 1860, the source being the photographer himself, who celebrated twenty-five years of work in the profession in 1885. Cf. Mossakowska, 12. The year 1859 figures in the *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* as the date Rzewuski moved from amateur to professional photography. Cf. John Hannavy, ed., *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1: 141.

repurposed from an old glasshouse.[20] He worked there until 1867, building up his clientele, some from the wealthy bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Following a precise description of the entirety of the studio equipment, listing all the furniture, props, and screens, Wanda Mossakowska notes:

> All the equipment was constantly being moved around, like the set of a play. The screens made of paper or canvas on stretchers could slide. The furniture and props in front of the screens were easily mobile, with wheels installed in their bases or legs. Some props came apart, so they could be assembled in various ways; the base of a column, for instance, could be removed from its pedestal and set alone.[21]

The photographer, arranging the backdrop, posing the model or a whole group of people, was like a theatre director, and undoubtedly Walery's fondness for the theatre came in handy. After only two years, in 1864, he began making his greatest dream come true. He decided to build his own house, including a photography studio. The building, which now stands at Westerplatte Street 11 (previously Podwale Street 27), a gigantic palace with a wide driveway, designed by architect Feliks Księżarski, was built over three years; its grand opening was on November 1, 1867. This was the first building to be designed as a photography studio, not adapted, on Polish lands. The Kraków press described the Walery Rzewuski Photo Studio in detail in 1867, and a year later it found its way into Warsaw's *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, accompanied by woodcuts.[22] The building delighted the journalists with its spacious glassed-in studio, the elegance and finishings of the changing rooms, the modernity of the whole laboratory, and the numerous workshops. Rzewuski paid close attention to the communication system—"the studio is furnished with speaking tubes for talking to remote parts of the building," the reports read—as he did to such details as the entrance door handle, "whose button depicted a camera, and the handle the curtain thrown on the camera's tripod, held in a falcon's talons."[23] The photographer put engravings of the exterior facade and the studio on the backs of his photographs

[20] For a full description of the studio on Kopernika Street 12, see Mossakowska, 15–24.

[21] Mossakowska, 19.

[22] See *Czas*, no. 225 (1867); [Władysław L. Anczyc] Wł. L. A., "Zakład fotograficzny Walerego Rzewuskiego w Krakowie," *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, no. 23 (1868): 270–71. See also Mossakowska, 24–44; Witold Kanicki, Dorota Łuczak, and Maciej Szymanowicz, eds., *Polscy fotografowie, krytycy i teoretycy o fotografii 1839–1989: Antologia* (Poznań: Uniwersytet Artystyczny im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz w Poznaniu, 2023), 102–203.

[23] *Czas*, no. 225 (1867).

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FIG. 1. Facade of photo studio

Reverse of Walery Rzewuski's photograph, 1867

FIG. 2. Interior of photo studio

Reverse of Walery Rzewuski's photograph, 1867

(**FIG. 1** and **2**). Walery Rzewuski worked in this studio until he died in 1888. He used the wet collodion process right up until 1882.

In early 1861, Helena gave birth to an illegitimate son, Rudolf, left Kraków with the child's father, Gustaw Zimajer, and under the pseudonym Modrzejewska, began taking her first steps on stages in smaller towns, in the troupe of Konstanty Łobojko. Exploring the intersection between photography and theatre, Łobojko, an actor and the director of the theatre, is highly interesting, because he was also a photographer. The sources show that he taught photography in Vienna, for instance, in 1856, and that in Bochnia, where Modjeska's stage debut took place, he intended to open a photo studio.[24] He probably knew Walery and Helena from before. We know that from 1854 until the 1859/60 season he was an actor at the Kraków Theatre and worked in the

[24] See "Konstanty Łobojko," in *Słownik Biograficzny Teatru Polskiego 1765–1965*, ed. Zbigniew Raszewski, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973), 398–399.

same ensemble as Helena's half-brother, Feliks Benda. Might not Łobojko have influenced the emerging actor to take an interest in the new medium of photography and to use her exceptional talent, for an actor of her time, for photography to shape her theatre career? These questions and many others concerning Modejska's family and the beginnings of her professional path have yet to be fully documented. For the time being, we can be quite certain that Helena grew up among people who were interested in both theatre and photography. To recall the familiar facts, we know that in July 1865, the twenty-five-year-old Helena returned to Kraków with her four-year-old son, and heaps of life and professional experience. She had lived through the death of her daughter, Maria (1862–1865), and a separation from the father of her children, Gustaw Zimajer. As an actor she had performed on a range of small provincial stages, but also the great Skarbkowski Theatre in Lwów [presently Lviv, Ukraine], where she worked from October 1862 to February 1863 on a vaudeville contract,[25] and had had her first taste of fame as the star of the theatre in Czerniowce (in the ensemble from April 1863 to around July 1865). In April 1865 she had the chance to see Vienna, including the Burgtheater. In the autumn of 1865 she was hired by the Kraków Theatre. Her Kraków debut came on October 10, 1865, as Sara in Wacław Szymanowski's tragedy *Salomon*; in the course of one evening she established herself as the prima donna of the Kraków stage. The photographer Walery Rzewuski was probably sitting in his usual seat in the second-floor balcony,[26] lorgnette in hand. It is quite possible that, watching the actor, he felt much like a critic who described her Kraków debut:

> In this role [of Sara] Mrs Modrzejewska made her first appearance on our stage; she is a Cracovian, born Bendówna, who has only acted on provincial stages for three or four years now. Mrs. Modrzejewska immediately showed herself to be an artist of the sort rarely found even on the stages of the great capitals, an artist who, with some work and knowledgeable direction, may come to stand among the brightest. Nature has been kind to her. It has endowed her amply with everything an artist most needs; apart from a beautiful exterior, figure, and voice, it has bestowed her with the gift of artistic insight, allowing her to sense by instinct alone what a role requires. For Mrs. Modrzejewska also has that delicacy in her entire "approach" to things; that grace which even the most

[25] On the Lviv stage of Modrzejewska's career, see Agnieszka Marszałek, "Modrzejewska we Lwowie," in *Galicyjskie spotkania 2009*, ed. Urszula Jakubowska (Zabrze: Wydawnictwo Inforteditions, 2010), 151–175.

[26] See Kleczkowski, *Walery Rzewuski*, 89.

> concerted work cannot manufacture, for ultimately, one must be born a true artist. Mrs. Modrzejewska had the audience on her side at once.[27]

She was photographed in Rzewuski's studio in the role of Sara. This is also the first item in the collection of glass negatives stored at the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków.[28] Rzewuski photographed Modjeska right until the end of her stay in Kraków. In September 1869, she left the city, to join the dramatic ensemble of the government Warsaw Theatre. It is unlikely that Rzewuski ever photographed her again. We have no knowledge of a photograph or a letter documenting their further relations.

In the history of nineteenth-century Polish photography, Walery Rzewuski is remembered as a brilliant portraitist,[29] and his studio at Westerplatte Street 11 was, as we have mentioned, considered to be the largest and most modern in Polish lands. Rzewuski also photographed the Tatra mountains and took ethnographic pictures. We see his fondness for the city and its art in photographs of the monuments of Kraków and reproductions of paintings, including those by Jan Matejko. He also did social work; in 1869 he joined the Kraków City Council, getting involved in the municipal administration. He initiated, for instance, the construction of a new theatre building in Kraków (presently the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre), contributing private funds to this end. A close friend of Rzewuski's, the dramaturg Władysław Ludwik Anczyc, aptly noted that the photographer tried to "put the stamp of art on everything around him."[30] His interest in theatre set him apart from other Polish portraitists of the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is visible not only in his photographs of Kraków's actors in their roles, but also his group photos and *tableaux vivants*. He liked arranging compositions with multiple figures; in 1864, for instance, he took a self-portrait, in which Wilhelmina Stein poses surrounded by mirrors, painted portraits, and family members, both sitting and standing. Altogether, the portrait has eight people.[31] Another interesting example is Modjeska's family portrait of 1865, where she and her mother are in the center of the picture, surrounded by eleven others.[32] There is also a composition of nineteen unidentified people

[27] [Antoni Kłobukowski], "Teatr," in *Czas*, no. 231 (1865): 3.

[28] Jagiellonian Library Kraków, Special Collection, BJ Graf. I.F. 17.127 and 17.128.

[29] See Ignacy Płażewski, *Dzieje polskiej fotografii 1839–1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Książka i Wiedza, 2003), 416–417.

[30] See Kanicki, Łuczak, and Szymanowicz, *Polscy fotografowie*, 37.

[31] See Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski*, 276.

[32] See Orzechowski, *Helena Modrzejewska*, 38.

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FIG. 3. Portrait of unidentified people from the Stadnicki family from Radawiec Wielki and Osmolice
Walery Rzewuski, circa 1865

surrounded by the Stadnicki family (**FIG. 3**). In the group compositions we see Rzewuski's fondness for directing, his attention to the relations between the sitters, and a play of gazes and gestures between the various people, as if captured in motion. His group portraits resemble *tableaux vivants*, which he photographed in his studio on several occasions. The *tableau vivant* has a long tradition, in which people in costumes and made up, accompanied by props and posed, reconstruct a picture or a scene from literature. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, *tableaux vivants*, especially popular among the aristocracy, received a new lease of life in the photo studio.[33] Rzewuski took many *tableau vivant* photographs, the most famous examples of which are those of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *By Fire and Sword* (**FIG. 4**) of 1884. He not only photographed the main actors of the Kraków Theatre in their roles (apart from Helena Modrzejewska, there also being Antonina Hoffman, Wincenty Rapacki, Feliks Benda, and Bolesław Ładnowski), he also designed and produced what we would

[33] For more on *tableaux vivants*, see Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski*, 169–173.

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FIG. 4. Photograph from the series of *tableaux vivant* of *By Fire and Sword* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, standing: Andrzej Zamoyski (Skrzetuski), Edward Jaroszyński (Rzędzian), Aleksy Stróżyński (Podbipięta), Roman Wodzicki (Wołodyjowski), Bronisław Abramowicz (Zagłoba)
WALERY RZEWUSKI, CIRCA 1884

today call the first photo book on the theatre. The sole copy we have is in the collections of the Museum of Kraków. This is the *Stage Album of A. Hoffmann, Artist of the Kraków Theatre* of 1868.[34] The book measures 23 x 15 centimeters, has twenty-eight pages, and includes twenty-eight 9 x 13-centimeter prints of twelve female actors in costume, captured in the studio. The captions provide the name and author of the play, the act number, and a quote from the role in question. For instance, the title role of Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna*, one of Hoffmann's greatest roles, is presented in six shots, in various costumes from Acts II, III, and IV. A review of the book emphasized:

> Mr. Rzewuski's photographs are not a mare reflection and presentation of likenesses, they are true works of art unto themselves, so ably capturing the

[34] See Museum of Kraków, collection *Album Sceniczne A. Hoffmann, Artystki Teatru Krakowskiego* (Kraków, 1868), https://ct.mhk.pl/wps/portal/mhmk/main/strona-artefaktu/?artefactId=%7B6B637914-7A8E-434E-BFDC-4B6CE23490F3%7D.

> best moment and rendering an aesthetic pose, facial expression, and even play of physiognomy. . . . Mr Rzewuski takes photographs not only of individual situations, but also whole scenes from the greatest dramatic works.[35]

Photographs taken of other actors, including Helena Modjeska, were planned for similar publications that have either not survived to our day, or were not ultimately published.[36] Only prints of actors in roles have survived (most of Rzewuski's theatre photographs being found in the Museum of Kraków collections) aside from the collection of glass negatives held by the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków.

Glass Negatives

The glass negatives made their way to the Jagiellonian Library collections in 1972, sold by the heirs of Maria Antonina Dobrowolska. Before that, in 1956, reproductions were made from negatives owned by Dobrowolska for Jerzy Got's book documenting Helena Modrzejewska's performances in 1865–1869.[37] The collection includes fifty-five negatives made using the wet collodion process. The glass plates are unevenly cut, measuring around 10–12 x 8 centimeters, and of varying thicknesses of around 1.5–3 millimeters. They have numerous cracks and chips in the emulsion, and stickers with thin strings, which were probably stuck to the edges in the 1970s. It is hard to imagine their purpose, though it was probably to make it easier to handle the glass. The negatives were digitized at the Walery Rzewuski Museum of Photography in Kraków, which is the "leading digitization institution in Poland, owing to the work of the Picture Documentation Workshop in 2010." The equipment, specialists, work standards, and international certificates have helped achieve the workshop's main aim, to "always achieve a digital file that in no way differs from the original".[38] The digital files of the negatives and the processed prints are available in the digital collections of the Jagiellonian Library.

In the fifty-five negatives, Rzewuski captured seventeen roles by female actors, of which fourteen have been identified and three remain unknown. One

35 *Dziennik Poznański*, no. 118 (1868): 2–3.

36 For more on the topic: *Album Sceniczne*, see Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski*, 166–168.

37 See Jerzy Got, *Helena Modrzejewska na scenie krakowskiej 1865–1869* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1956).

38 Walery Rzewuski Museum of Photography in Kraków, *Cennik usług digitalizacyjnych*, 2023, 1682775216_1682679126cennik-uslug-digitalizacyjnych.pdf (mufo.krakow.pl).

FIG. 5 and **6** Helena Modjeska as *Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet*, negative and positive
Walery Rzewuski, circa 1867

negative shows Antonina Hoffmann as Beata in Józef Szujski's *Halszka of Ostróg*. (In other frames she poses alongside Modjeska, who plays the title role.) The fourteen identified roles of 1865–1869 in which Modjeska posed are: Sara in Wacław Szymanowski's *Salomon*, the title role in Alojzy Feliński's *Barbara Radziwiłłówna*, Praxedes in Józef Korzeniowski's *Carpathian Highlanders*, the title role in Józef Szujski's *Queen Jadwiga*, Maria in Adolf d'Ennery and Gustave Lemoine's *Sabaudia, or: Blessing of a Mother*, the title role in Józef Szujski's *Halszka of Ostróg*, Doña Sol de Silva in Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, Countess de Meyran in Pierre Berton's *A Difficult Test*, the title role in Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, Adam Kazanowski in Józef Szujski's *Court of Prince Władysław*, Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, probably Amelia in Juliusz Słowacki's *Mazepa* (though she did not play this role on the Kraków Theatre stage in 1865–1869, it was in her repertoire), and Princess Eboli in Schiller's *Don Carlos*. The seventeen roles captured on a thin layer of collodion are but a fraction of those the actor created in the Kraków Theatre in 1865–1869.[39] Was the selection made by the actor or the photographer? Who decided on the

[39] Cf. Jerzy Got and Józef Szczublewski, *Helena Modrzejewska* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1958), 72–75.

particular scenes and poses?[40] We have no source materials to provide a definite answer. The photographer's surviving correspondence includes a letter from the actor Henryka Benda, the daughter of Modjeska's half-brother, Feliks Benda, who belonged to the Kraków Theatre ensemble in 1866–1873. In an undated letter to Rzewuski she wrote:

> Kind sir,
> I am now quite free and if it suits you, I shall definitely prepare for tomorrow, if only you will tell me the hour, and fill me in if I'll be needing costumes? Perhaps from my most recent roles: "Hamlet—Othello—Assassin". Do please respond and I shall be happy to fully comply. I remain respectfully yours,
> Henryka Benda.[41]

The actor intended to "fully comply" with the photographer's suggestions. We find the same advice in the Warsaw publication *Przewodniku dla fotografujących się* [A Guide to Being Photographed]. Upon consulting with photographer Jan Mieczkowski, the guide's author stated in the chapter on costume that "in terms of costume and pose, the most experienced and graceful woman must submit to and trust the advice of the photographer."[42] Paging through the correspondence of the photo studio's clientele in the Jagiellonian Library collections, we may draw conclusions about the limitless confidence Rzewuski enjoyed in terms of choosing his clients' poses. We know Modjeska had close and heartfelt relations with the photographer. She was later known for tending to her costumes, so we may assume that in this case, too, the details of the session may have been a joint decision, though the responsibility for the shots and the various poses was the photographer's, as he was preparing material to put out a photo book.

I must confess that it is a remarkable experience to hold the glass plates, covered in a thin layer of collodion, with images of the actor from over 150 years ago. The actor posed, remaining in one position for several seconds in natural light; one of the negatives, with a wide backdrop and a horizontal layout, shows a fragment of a studio window. The process of capturing this moment in the wet collodion process was highly complex. Wanda Mossakowska recalls a part of a book translated by Rzewuski himself, written by German scientist

[40] More about posing and the methods of interpreting theatre atelier photography are described by Alicja Kędziora, "Theater Photographs as a Source of Research on the Cultural Heritage of 2nd Half of the 19. Century," *Zarządzanie w Kulturze*, no.15 (2014): 59–76.

[41] Jagiellońska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, *Listy do zakładu fotograficznego Walerego Rzewuskiego w Krakowie z lat 1861–1889*, vol. 1, manuscript, card 38.

[42] Edmund Wężyk, *Przewodnik dla fotografujących się* (Warszawa, 1876), 17.

FIG 7 and **8.** Helena Modjeska as Barbara Radziwiłłówna by Alojzy Feliński, negative and positive
WALERY RZEWUSKI, CIRCA 1865

and photographer Hermann Vogel, in which the author explains the error of those who believe the photographer's work only involves opening and closing the lens cap.

> For this operation is but one link in a great chain of twenty-eight operations that every plate undergoes to produce its first negative, and then another eight operations are necessary to turn that negative into a print.[43]

In a nutshell, the most important activities involved in the creation of, for instance, one shot of Modrzejewska's Ophelia are: choose the right glass, with no scratches or bubbles; cut the desired plate format with diamond; trim the sharp edges and begin the long process of cleaning the plate, immersing it in various solutions and rinsing it in water, then polishing it with a clean rag. The recommended time for using a plate is twenty-four hours. Then pour collodion on the plate (prepared not more than a week earlier). Pouring the collodion on the plate evenly takes practice and experience, as the solution quickly congeals.

43 Mossakowska, *Walery Rzewuski*, 45.

To this day, marks from the photographer's thumbs are visible on the edges of the negatives. When the solution became gelatinous, the plate was placed in a silver nitrate solution, and then in a tightly sealed cartridge that slid into the camera, whose focus was already set. The exposure time, like every part of this process, depended on the photographer's experience and ability. The exposure generally took a few seconds, then the cartridge with the plate was removed and developed at once. The collodion lost its light sensitivity after about two to five minutes, depending on the air temperature. The plate was repeatedly poured with the relevant solutions, then rinsed with water, which stopped the development, and then the fixing process was underway. The dried negative was covered with varnish and sometimes touched up (**FIG. 5** and **6**).[44]

Despite the destruction wrought by over 150 years of history, the digital files of the negatives allow us to appreciate Rzewuski's craft—the sharpness, light, and composition of the shots. The enlargement of the digital file lets us perceive the minutest details of the actor's body (the hands, nails, hair, eyes, mouth, facial expression), her costume (the texture of the material and ornamentation) (**FIG. 7** and **8**), or the props (a fan, a glove, a guitar). The actor re-enacted her first roles on the professional stage for the camera. Rzewuski was able to capture everything the critics tried to describe—the near-indescribable grace and charm that enraptured audiences in so many theatres in Europe and America; the beauty of the poses, the deliberate hand gestures, and the details of the costume. Rzewuski took sequential photographs. The best example here is a series of photographs of a male role by the actor, who played Adam Kazanowski in Józef Szujski's drama *The Court of Prince Władysław*. Eight shots of this role have survived; placed in order, they imitate movement. We see the actor's changing facial expressions. I consider some of Rzewuski's greatest accomplishments to be the way in which he captured the tensions wrought on Modjeska's face. He photographed three of the actor's roles in which she played scenes of madness and suffering—the insanity of Praxedes (**FIG. 9** and **10**), the madness of Ophelia, and the dramatic scene of Gretchen's sufferings. All three roles were photographed in close-up, as if seen from a lorgnette in the theatre. All the shots are set against a neutral backdrop, allowing us to fully concentrate on the actor. They were all taken with an American shot, or, as in Gretchen's case, in an even tighter frame, with a medium shot (**FIG. 11** and **12**, **13** and **14**). In the role of Gretchen in particular, the low angle of the camera comes as a surprise; it is adjusted to the actor, who is sitting or kneeling. The close-up lets us experience the actor's emotions, which we read

[44] I explain matters connected to the wet collodion process with reference to Wanda Mossakowska's book, see Mossakowska, 45–49.

FIG. 9 and **10.** Helena Modjeska as Praxedes in *Karpaccy górale* (Carpathian highlanders) by Józef Korzeniowski, negative and positive
WALERY RZEWUSKI, CIRCA 1866

on her face, but also the tension in her body. I get the feeling that in these first photo sessions Rzewuski was able to spot and record the actor's unpolished talent on the glass negative. Her art was initially realist, based on creative intuition and observation. Later, in her Warsaw period, she evolved into a style characteristic of the thespian art of the 1870s—realistic idealism, devoid of the beautiful pose that would become her trademark. Her Warsaw photographs, most often taken with Jan Mieczkowski,[45] and all the subsequent ones, fit the idealistic style perfectly.

Modjeska's power of expression captured in Rzewuski's photographs was so intense that, according to the historical sources, she was invited for guest appearances in Warsaw as a direct result. Her pictures as Ophelia must have been taken after the premiere on the Kraków stage, after November 30, 1867. Three months later, on February 24, 1868, Aleksander Przezdziecki, who organized Modjeska's guest appearances, wrote a letter describing how the chair of the Government Director of Warsaw Theatres and his assistant reacted to her photographs: "General Hauke and former Secretary of State Zaborowski raved about Rzewuski's collection of photographs, especially Ophelia, exclaiming how they yearned to invite you to do a guest

45 Cf. Wanicka, "'They Were Devouring Her with Their Eyes.'"

FIG. 11 and **12.** Helena Modjeska as Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, negative and positive
Walery Rzewuski, circa 1869

appearance on the Warsaw stage."[46] Przezdziecki's efforts were successful: Modjeska had a series of performances in Warsaw in October and November 1868, which led to her employment there in autumn 1869. The actor used Rzewuski's photographs in an advertising campaign accompanying her appearances. They graced shop displays and were featured in an illustrated magazine as woodcuts.[47] This was the first photographic advertising campaign planned by a Polish female actor in Polish lands. Writer and historian Kazimierz Chłędowski visited Lwów and wrote to Modjeska:

> I saw a woodcut in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* depicting you in several major roles—I very much regretted not having the opportunity to see the photographs from which the woodcuts were made, as I believe the former must convey the shades of your artistic renditions even more truthfully and beautifully.[48]

[46] Letter from Aleksander Przezdziecki to Helena Modrzejewska dated February 24, 1868, letter no. 22, in *Modrzejewska/Listy 1*, 73.

[47] See Tableau, ill. Franciszek Tegazzo, engraving Aleksander Regulski, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* no. 41 (1868): 173.

[48] Letter from Kazimierz Chłędowski to Helena Modrzejewska dated December 27, 1868, letter no. 54, in *Modrzejewska/Listy1*, 110.

FIG. 13 and **14.** Helena Modjeska as Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, negative and positive

WALERY RZEWUSKI, CIRCA 1869

It is no accident that six negatives by Józef Sebald have been added to the collection of Rzewuski's negatives. Józef Sebald (1853–1931) apprenticed in Rzewuski's studio, among others, and in 1896 he purchased the photographer's old studio on Westerplatte Street 11, taking over his old clients, employees, and archive of negatives. He also adopted the tradition of photographing actors, and in 1897 he began taking stage photographs in the theatre. In 1901 he transferred to a studio on Batorego Street 12. It was there, in 1903, that Helena Modjeska posed for photographs during her guest performances at the Miejski Theatre (which became the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in 1909). The surviving negatives depict three of her roles—the title role in Sophocles' *Antigone* (three shots), the title role in Hermann Sudermann's *Magda* (*Family Nest*) (two shots) and Silvia Settala in Gabriele d'Annuzio's *Gioconda* (one shot). The actor was sixty-three at the time. The technology had changed. The surviving glass negatives use the gelatin silver process. Five of them measure 13 x 21 centimeters, and one, with the role of Antigone, is larger, at 26.8 x 20.6 centimeters (**FIG. 15** and **16**). The plates are around 1.5 millimeters thick. They are coated in a thick layer of varnish or transparent enamel. They are in excellent shape, as if they were never used to make

FIG. 15 and **16.** Helena Modjeska as Antigone by Sopholces, negative and positive
Józef Sebald, circa 1903

prints. We may assume that the actor did not assign them much importance. She responds laconically to the persistent queries of the wife of the director of the Kraków theatre, Lucyna Kotarbińska. "I cannot send photographs, because Sebald has not yet sent them to me. I can only hope he will send them soon," she wrote on May 12, 1903. And nearly a month later: "I apologize for not having sent the photographs, but I fell ill, and meanwhile they were packed somewhere and I have been unable to find them."[49] In 1903 no one supposed these would be the actor's final guest appearances in her home town, nor the last Kraków photographs. Modjeska performed on American stages until 1907. She passed away in Newport Beach, California, on April 8, 1909, and was buried in Kraków.

When researching nineteenth-century theatre photography, I mainly work with prints on paper and on stiff cardboard, *carte de visite* size as well as larger showcase prints, sometimes as large as 40 x 20 centimeters. The printed postcards are a separate group that gained popularity at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was the first time I encountered glass negatives

[49] Letters from Helena Modrzejewska to Lucyna Kotarbińska dated May 12 and June 5, 1903, letters no. 1,006 and 1,007, *Modrzejewska/Listy 2*, 498–499.

capturing an actor in various roles; I could hold them in my hand, under the light, and then, following their digitization, see them projected on a screen.

I admit I fell under the spell of these negatives, and not just in an aesthetic sense—I had a similar sense of delight when I first encountered the work of Henry Fox Talbot—but they also began to interest me in the context behind theatre photography. Following an approach lauded by Joel Anderson in *Theatre & Photography*, that "shows how the two might provide standpoints for comprehending each other, and considers the interactions between photography and theatre as a strategy for understanding both,"[50] I decided to have a look at the negative in terms of the history of photography and theatre. I was directly inspired by Geoffrey Batchen's *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography*. Following such examples as Roland Barthes and Rosalind Krauss, Batchen calls attention to the widespread omission of the negative from discussions on photography. He recalls an "influential description of photography" by Rosalind Krauss from 1981 as "an imprint or transfer of the real" and states:

> By never mentioning negatives in the rest of her essay, she implies a direct indexical connection between "the world" and a positive print, a connection in which a negative has no role except as a non-mediating conduit between one and the other.[51]

During the period of using the wet collodion technique, from the 1850s to the 1880s, negatives constituted a separate object, dividing photography into two seemingly disconnected yet simultaneously related parts. The negative, Batchen writes, "remains invisible, hidden away, without public presence, until such time as a print is generated from it."[52] On the flip sides of their pictures, nineteenth-century photographers like Rzewuski made notes on the storage of the plates. "The plate is stored for two years" we read on the green ribbon decorating the back of the photograph (**FIG. 2**). His correspondence is full of requests for additional prints from the glass plates stored in the archive. "A few years ago I had my picture taken in your studio. . . . As you have sent me over a dozen copies since then, I can only hope the glass is still intact," wrote one client from Lwów.[53] When Sebald took over Rzewuski's studio, as detailed abo-

[50] Joel Anderson, *Theatre & Photography* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 1.

[51] Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

[52] Batchen, *Negative/Positive*, 258.

[53] Jagiellońska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, *Listy do zakładu fotograficznego Walerego Rzewuskiego w Krakowie z lat 1861–1889*, vol. 5, manuscript, 173.

ve, he inherited the plates. This was how the negative plates of Modjeska from 1865–1869 were preserved and then combined to make a single collection with Sebald's glass negatives of 1903. The negatives were the "souls" of the photo studio; they allowed the photographer to make prints at the drop of a hat. The author of *Negative/Positive* notes:

> negatives are (usually) unique, whereas photographic prints are (often) multiples, being produced as replicas (or near replicas) of each other. For this reason, all photographs suffer from some form of multiple personality disorder.[54]

In the chapter "On Negative Truth" in the book *The Negative Pole of Photography*, Witold Kanicki cites the views of Wolfgang Schröder, who emphasizes the truth of the negative in contrast to the positive, which "allows for manipulation and censorship."[55] He quotes writers—Erich Kästner and Samuel Beckett—for whom "the negative, unlike the positive, was perceived . . . as the only reliable witness of reality."[56] Looking at the digitized negatives, I realized that for the first time I experienced such a strong sense of the uniqueness and authenticity of photography. Kanicki also refers to Jerzy Lewczyński's theory, presented in his *Archaeology of Photography*, in which the negative plays an important role. A fundamental element in studying the past is the "search for witnesses of past events,"[57] and for Lewczyński, such a witness proves to be the light recorded on the negative. Kanicki noted that, due to its nature as an "authentic witness," the negative has the "ability to capture the energy of time and place," quoting Leszczyński: "especially the negative, as the original form of photography, can be understood as a valuable transmission of the energetic relationships present at the moment the photograph was taken."[58] I realized that the strong emotions I perceive in Modjeska, captured on the negative, may result from this energy—the theatrical passion of the photographer and the talent of the actress. In the primacy and originality of the negative, I see a similarity to a dramatic character recorded in a theatrical script. Through rehearsals and during the theatrical evening, the character is brought to life—appearing on the stage—and almost never, as with positive prints, is identical. It can be performed repeatedly,

54 Batchen *Negative/Positive*, 6.

55 Witold Kanicki, *Ujemny biegun fotografii: Negatywowe obrazy w sztuce nowoczesnej* (Gdańsk: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, 2015), 123.

56 Kanicki, *Ujemny biegun fotografii*.

57 Kanicki, 124.

58 Kanicki, 125.

always being a variation of the character recorded in the script. In the process of bringing the character to life and transforming it into a stage role, I became intrigued by the "in-between" space so important in the theory of the negative.[59] The "duality" of theatre photographs, which until the 1890s were made only in the studio where actors and actresses in costumes reenacted stage roles, also fits into the phenomenon of the "in-between." Its essence is becoming, being in motion, which is the main observation of Batchen, who, looking at the history of photography from the perspective of the negative, writes about

> photography as the embodiment of a binary opposition in which each part is continually dependent on, and yet separated from, its other. Such a structure means that the photograph is neither singular nor static but is instead always in a state of becoming, always in the process of differing from itself, always in motion.[60]

I did not expect that, by studying the glass negatives containing Helena Modjeska's first and last Kraków roles, I would begin to see in photography not the "what has been" of Roland Barthes,[61] as I had before, but the "what will be"—the process in motion.

Translated by Søren Gauger

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59 More about "in -between," see Kanicki, 232.

60 Batchen, 259.

61 "The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive," Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Classics, 2020), 103. Barthes also writes about photography "without future," see: "(T)he Photograph breaks the 'constitutive style' (this is its astonishment); it is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic (what is it, then?—It is, then simply 'normal' like life). Motionless, the Photograph flows back from presentation to retention," Barthes, 109.

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