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“I Was Swayed by This Thought”:

The Story of a Photography Project by Michał Chomiński That Never Came to Be

Abstract

This article discusses a photographic project by Michał Chomiński (1819–1886), an actor and chronicler of the Warsaw State Theaters. Based on primary sources (partly included in the appendix), this reconstruction of the hitherto untold story of

Chomiński's Gallery of Dramatic Artists of Warsaw Theaters broadens our knowledge of the beginnings of Polish theater historiography. Chomiński is shown as the first collector of theater iconography who appreciated the documentary value of the photograph. The methodological framework of the article is based on selected aspects of research on collecting practices from a cultural studies perspective.

Keywords

Michał Chomiński, nineteenth-century theater photography, history of the Polish theater 1765–1880, actor's craft, Warsaw State Theaters, Konrad Brandel, collecting

Abstrakt

„Kotysałem się tą myślą”: Historia niezrealizowanego projektu fotograficznego Michała Chomińskiego

Artykuł dotyczy niezrealizowanego projektu fotograficznego autorstwa Michała Chomińskiego (1819–1886), aktora i kronikarza Teatrów Warszawskich. Oparta na materiałach źródłowych, częściowo publikowanych w aneksie, rekonstrukcja nieopisanej dotąd historii wydania Galerii Artystów Dramatycznych Teatrów Warszawskich poszerza refleksje nad początkami polskiej historiografii teatralnej. Chomiński został ukazany jako pierwszy kolekcjoner ikonografii teatralnej, który docenił wagę fotografii jako dokumentu. Ramę metodologiczną artykułu stanowią wybrane aspekty kulturoznawczych studiów nad praktykami kolekcjonerskimi.

Słowa kluczowe

Michał Chomiński, dziewiętnastowieczna fotografia teatralna, historia teatru polskiego 1765–1880, emploi, Teatry Warszawskie, Konrad Brandel, kolekcjonerstwo

In Polish theater history, Michał Chomiński (1821–1886) has gone down as a supporting actor, a practitioner of low comedy, and a chronicler of the Warsaw stage. *The Comedian Chronicler* was the title of the recollections of him by Władysław Krogulski, a member of his ensemble who shared his passion for recording theater history.¹ In the preface to *Słownik biograficzny teatru polskiego 1765–1965* (A Biographical Dictionary of the Polish Theater 1765–1965), the actor's chronicling activities were described as follows:

Chomiński himself noted down the outstanding events in Warsaw's theater scene in great tomes, along with various details culled from the Warsaw Government Theaters archive. At the same time, he drew friends into his project and gave them special tasks. At his behest, Władysław Krogulski sketched his theater portraits (partly released in 1901–1902 and in 1938–1939). On his commission, Jan Tomasz Seweryn Jasiński (1806–1879) compiled a glossary of people working in Polish theaters from 1765 to about the mid-nineteenth century. We cannot doubt that in this way, by various routes, Chomiński was moving toward one aim: to create a full who's-who of theater people. He did not, however, finish his work, he did not manage to salvage it in the form of a single manuscript.²

Reconstructing the space of the Wielki Theater building on Teatralny Square in *Dramat i komedia Teatrów Warszawskich 1868–1880* (The Dramas and Comedies of Warsaw's Theaters, 1868–1880), I depicted both actors in the theater library:

The most frequent guests of the library were actors who were also passionate about theater history, Michał Chomiński and Władysław Krogulski, whom Janina Pudełek has called "pioneers of Polish theater studies." It was precisely in July 1868 that Chomiński began gathering biographical materials, a project he publicly announced, continued for many years, and never completed.³

¹ See Władysław Krogulski, *Notatki starego aktora: Przewodnik po teatrze warszawskim XIX wieku*, selected and ed. Dorota Jarzabek-Wasył and Agnieszka Wanicka (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 155–170.

² Zbigniew Raszewski, introduction to *Słownik biograficzny teatru polskiego 1765–1965* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973), ix.

³ Agnieszka Wanicka, *Dramat i komedia Teatrów Warszawskich 1868–1880* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011), 59.

PHOTO KONRAD BRANDEL, 1866



Michał Chomiński as Urban in
Werbel domowy (The Household
Drum) by Jan Kanty Gregorowicz

MUSEUM OF KRAKOW

Chomiński described his project in a document that begins with a phrase declaring his plans: “A few words about my notion of publishing a Gallery of the Dramatic Artists of the Warsaw Theaters.” This description is an introduction to the famous *Notaty do życia teatru warszawskiego XIX wieku* (Notes on the Warsaw Theater Scene in the Nineteenth Century), edited by Eugeniusz Szwanowski, yet forever to remain a manuscript, though it earned the actor the nickname “the chronicler.”⁴ Taking this document as a road-map to the author’s thoughts and the actions he took, I will try to establish the scope of Chomiński’s project

⁴ Theater Museum in Warsaw (hereafter: MT), no. D.641-643/III, Michał Chomiński, *Notaty do życia teatru warszawskiego XIX wieku*, ed. Eugeniusz Szwanowski, typescript. The project description is found in the appendix to this article.

and its main aim. The reconstruction and contextual analysis of the project is accompanied by an attempt to define the reasons why his intention was not carried out, and was later forgotten.

The Gallery

The First Collection

In Chomiński's posthumous profiles, we find facts from his life and theater career, as well as information on his chronicling activities and collection of actors' portraits. On the day of his funeral, October 26, 1886, *Wiek* magazine wrote:

he has left behind twenty years of laboriously gathered materials for a history of the Polish stage in a sizable journal, full of notes and biographical details about artists of past and present, as well as a generous collection of pictures from years long past, a highly engrossing and valuable collection for future historians of theater and the dramatic arts in Poland.⁵

Information on the project did indeed appear in the press in 1868, but the story of the collection began much earlier.

The exact date is hard to pin down. We are certain that, in 1847, the young Chomiński already had a collection of several daguerreotypes he intended to expand. This is mentioned by Karol Estreicher, describing his visit to the actor's apartment on his first trip from Kraków to Warsaw. After this meeting, which occurred on September 14, 1847, he noted:

Chomiński learned of my interest in the history of the stage. He showed me daguerreotypes of Szuszkiewiczowa, Aszpergerowa, Piasecki, and his brother Ignacy, and told me how he yearned to collect stage artists' portraits. That was his first collection, which he only began expanding twenty years later.⁶

⁵ *Wiek* 14, no. 239 (1886): 3, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/253186>. See also: *Kurier Poranny* 10, no. 296 (1886): 3-4, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/135415>; *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 8, no. 200 (1886): 283, <https://polona.pl/item/tygodnik-illustrowany-seria-4-t-8-nr-200-30-pazdziernika-1886,Nzk5nt11Ng/12/#info:metadata>.

⁶ Karol Estreicher, *Michał Chomiński* (Kraków, 1886), 3-4, <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/8177>.

We know from Chomiński's testimony, also written over twenty years later, that this was an "assortment gathered at great effort and expense."⁷ He stored photographs in an album, and the walls of his room were hung with engravings of actors, including Bonawentura Kudlicz and Wojciech Piasecki. Chomiński's private collection, like any other, could be defined as

a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed places adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display.⁸

In 1847, Chomiński's collection held several daguerreotypes of actors: his elder brother, Ignacy, deceased a year before; Aniela Szuszkiewiczowa, his future wife, who appeared in a Kraków theater in 1842–1848; and Lwów (today Lviv, Ukraine) theater star Aniela Aszpergerowa. The daguerreotype Estreicher mentions, capturing one of Warsaw's greatest actors, Wojciech Piasecki, might have been a reproduction of a lithograph, watercolor, or miniature, as the actor died in 1837, two years before the invention of the daguerreotype was made public.

This invention took the world by storm. After the first public showing of daguerreotypes in Warsaw in November 1839, traveling daguerreotypers began operating, and professional studios opened up.⁹

A new social ritual emerged, bringing about family daguerreotype collections that were collected as avidly in the homes of the intelligentsia, bourgeoisie, and nobility as in aristocratic families. By the end of November 1845, *Kurier Warszawski* reported that "several citizens of Warsaw hold collections from ten to many dozen daguerreotypes of people they remember fondly."¹⁰

So wrote Danuta Jackiewicz in a book on Karol Beyer, owner of Warsaw's first stationary daguerreotype studio, opened in January 1845.¹¹ It is quite possible that he was behind the photographic reproduction of Piasecki's portrait.

⁷ Quotes from Chomiński's *Notaty*, unless otherwise noted, come from the edition listed in the appendix.

⁸ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 9.

⁹ Zenon Harasym, *Stare fotografie: Poradnik kolekcjonera* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 2012), 25.

¹⁰ Danuta Jackiewicz, *Fotografowie Warszawy: Karol Beyer* (Warszawa: Dom Spotkań z Historią, 2012), 9.

¹¹ Jackiewicz, *Karol Beyer*, 12–13.

“The mirror with a memory,” as daguerreotypes were called, also began committing actors to memory, systematically expanding the collections of Michał Chomiński, who was probably the first to gather actors’ portraits in Poland.

The Project

The popularity of the new invention grew with the development of the technology. In the early 1850s, the Beyer company changed its name to the Karol Beyer Photography Studio in Warsaw. The negative-positive method of Frederic Scott Archer and the capacity to make paper prints were novelties.¹² The next breakthrough was the lowering of production costs and the introduction of small-format photographs, known as *carte de visite*, which stoked enormous demand for photography in the decade to come.¹³ The rapid development of photography and the press, beginning in the 1860s, was a major factor behind the “epoch of the stars,” a phenomenon most visible in Warsaw spheres.¹⁴ According to Jerzy Got, the relationship between the public and the actors, known as “actormania” in Polish theater circles, only culminated in 1880–1890, and it was closely tied to the development of theater photography:

The simplest form of the cult of the actor is collecting photographs of worshiped artists. . . . To this we add the social custom of displaying photo albums in a prominent place in the salon. This tradition also demanded that these albums contained the following sections: photos of the man of the house and his family, photographs of actors (often signed), and finally, other family photos.¹⁵

Chomiński’s photography project, and indeed the thought that gave rise to it, came a moment before the advent of actormania, in the early 1860s.

The idea for the project was closely linked with an important event in the history of Warsaw photography. In September 1865, after seven years of work, Konrad Brandel decided to leave the Beyer company and open his own atelier

¹² Jackiewicz, 10.

¹³ Zenon Harasym, *Ze starego albumu* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2010), 14.

¹⁴ Jerzy Got, “Gwiazdorstwo i aktoromania w teatrze polskim XIX wieku,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 19, no. 3 (1970): 294–310. See also: Wanicka, *Dramat i komedia*, 181; Agnieszka Wanicka, “Inne spojrzenie na ‘epokę gwiazd,’” in *Nowe historie 1: Ustanawianie historii*, ed. Agata Adamięcka-Sitek, Dorota Buchwald, and Dariusz Kosiński (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszeńskiego, 2010), 157–192.

¹⁵ Jerzy Got, “Fotograficzna dokumentacja teatru w Polsce,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 9, no. 1 (1960): 77–78.

with his brother, Władysław, and Michał Olszyński.¹⁶ Chomiński kept in contact with Brandel's parents, and he had known the photographer, seventeen years his junior, since the latter was a child. To advertise the new atelier, Konrad Brandel and Co., in times of fierce competition between new photography studios,¹⁷ Brandel intended to use his acquaintance with the actor and take photographs of his best friend, Jan Królikowski—an admired and popular tragedian of the Warsaw stage—as well as Chomiński himself. The actors were photographed in twelve roles apiece, and sessions were held in February (Królikowski) and April (Chomiński) of 1866.¹⁸ In April, *Kurier Warszawski* reported that the “studio . . . intends to take similar photographs of other artists as well.”¹⁹ According to Chomiński, the initiative did not reap the anticipated profit—“they did not catch on with the public, as they were priced too high”—but they did give the studio a fine advertisement.

Królikowski's photographs in character were used to make compositions (or *tableaux*) that hung in the studio's display in June 1866, and in September appeared in *Kłosy* magazine,²⁰ whose art director was Brandel's partner, Michał Olszyński. A group of single photographs assembled on cardboard, then photographed and decorated, became the specialty of the new studio. The best example of this is the *Calendar for 1866*, composed of over two hundred pictures. After the publication's great success, work began on the more modest *Calendar for 1867*,²¹ where, among several dozen photographs, there were pictures of both actors in character. A visit to the atelier on Nowy Świat Street fired Chomiński's imagination:

I came early to the studio, as they were assembling all the groups (as long as they fit) into a large format, to a single frame. Seeing so many different states, vocations, trades, offices, etc., I began to feel bad that what was most alive, what was at the core of edification (for they see everything by touch), what could be of educational value, was entirely missing.

¹⁶ See Krystyna Lejko, *Kalendarze fotograficzne z zakładu Konrada Brandla: Obraz życia Warszawy w latach 60. XIX wieku* (Warszawa: Muzeum Historyczne m.st. Warszawy, 2009), 8.

¹⁷ See Lejko, *Kalendarze fotograficzne*, 9–12.

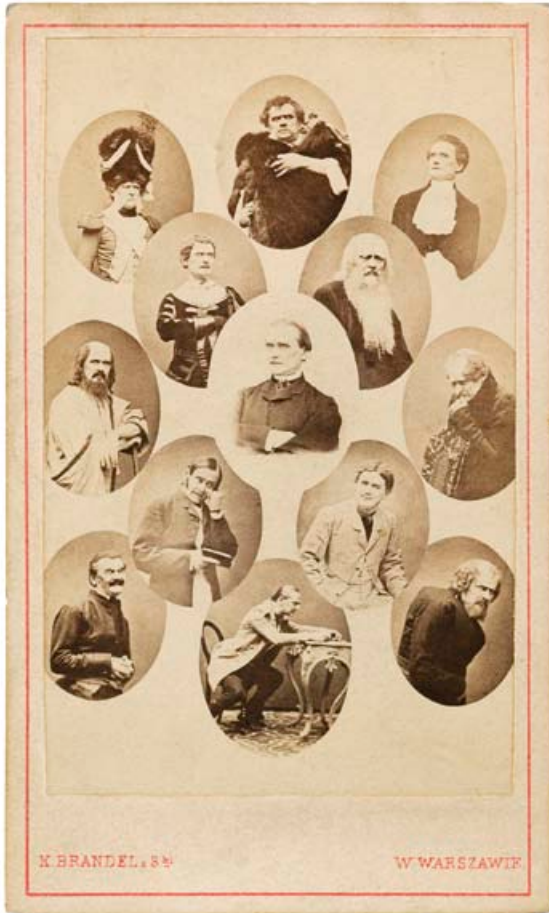
¹⁸ See Marta Ziętkiewicz, “Michał Chomiński i Jan Królikowski w obiektywie Konrada Brandla: Spojrzenie na polską fotografię teatralną z połowy XIX wieku,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 65, no. 1/2 (2016): 139–172.

¹⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 180 (1866), <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/373466>.

²⁰ See *Kłosy* 3, no. 65 (1866): 149, <https://polona.pl/item/klosy-czasopismo-illustrowane-tygodniowe-1866-t-3-nr-65-26-wrzesnia,01140DEWNBK/4/#info:metadata>. Similar *tableaux* with roles by Michał Chomiński were published two years later, *Kłosy* 7, no. 180 (1868): 309, <https://polona.pl/item/klosy-czasopismo-illustrowane-tygodniowe-1868-t-7-nr-180-10-grudnia-dod,01140DEYMIJG/4/#item>.

²¹ Cf. Lejko, *Kalendarze fotograficzne*.

PHOTO KONRAD BRANDEL, 1866



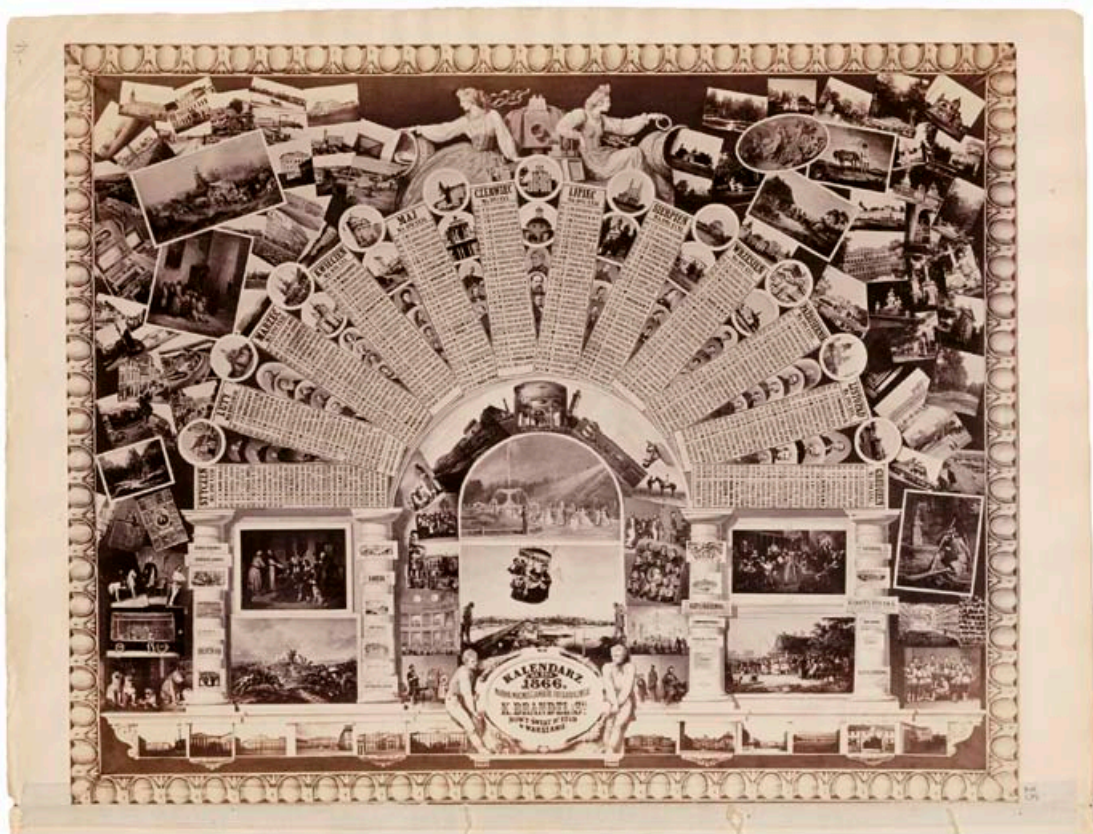
Jan Królikowski, *tableau* with twelve of the actor's roles

MUSEUM OF KRAKOW

This led to the birth of the idea to create *tableau* of actors' portraits, which Chomiński called a gallery. Initially, he planned to use photographs from the album, in which, he said, he "had them all," yet warned by photographers that he could lose the collection he had painstakingly gathered, he decided to ask friends to contribute their portraits.

Touch plays a major part in collecting. In describing haptic experiences, Renata Tańczuk stresses that:

When a collector touches objects from the past, it might be seen less as a way of confirming their existence than of communing with the past they derive from and which they bear. Through touching an object the past is materialized,



Calendar for 1866, Konrad Brandel and Co., 1866

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it is resurrected and grasped. We cannot go back in time, but we can touch the past, as it were.²²

This mechanism can be found in Chomiński's recollection: holding his album of actors' portraits and fearing for their loss, he turned his attention to the old engravings hanging on the walls. It was the sensory experience that led to the project's fundamental concept. Chomiński decided to enlarge the gallery with portraits of historical actors, drawn from Wojciech Bogusławski's

²² Renata Tańczuk, *Kolekcja—pamięć—tożsamość: Studia o kolekcjonerstwie* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2018), 52.

work.²³ The “sway of this thought” was joined by fears that the old engravings and contemporary photographs would not fit on a single piece of cardboard. When Brandel and Olszyński suggested completing the composition with a photograph of the theater building, the idea took its final shape. The gallery of dramatic artists, beginning with the founding of the Warsaw theater, which he joins Bogusławski in dating back to 1764,²⁴ was to take the form of a large *tableau*, upon which the old actors would be grouped around the old edifice of the theater on Krasiński Square, and his contemporary actors around the new theater on Teatralny Square. “I threw myself into gathering materials to build the collection,” Chomiński wrote.

Gathering Materials

In moving toward carrying out the project, the actor drew from twenty years of collecting experience. Yet this time the collections were to be made public, and he needed the cooperation of members of the theater community. First, Chomiński secured the support of Jan Królikowski, whose approval gave him more self-confidence. He also valued the acceptance of Florentyn Gwozdecki, an actor, props manager, and cashier, who had served as director of the Warsaw Theaters since 1862.

Chomiński was also in the good graces of retired actor and theater librarian Józef Świergocki, who was important not only for access to print materials, but also because the library gathered busts of deceased actors, which could be photographed when no engravings were available. The choice of collections was key here, given that:

The collection is an organized, structured world whose order is created by the principles of selecting objects, the classification rules adopted by the collector, which can lead to singling out sub-collections and designing the rules of their presentation.²⁵

In Chomiński’s project, the selection principles were swiftly determined: the photographs were meant to correspond to the list of dramatic artists appearing on

²³ See Wojciech Bogusławski, *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego na trzy części podzielone oraz Wiadomość o życiu sławnych artystów* (Warszawa, 1820; reprint, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1965).

²⁴ Bogusławski, *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego*, 1.

²⁵ Tańczuk, *Kolekcja—pamięć—tożsamość*, 163.

Warsaw's stages since 1764. Drawing up the list took him nearly six months, from October 17, 1867 to April 1868. We should emphasize that his list was the first register of actors of the Polish theater, and the documents he used still remain the most crucial sources in theater historiography. Apart from Bogusławski's *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego*, he consulted the *Roczniki Teatru Narodowego Warszawskiego* (Warsaw National Theater Annuals) from 1809–1816 with their lists of actors, *Spis oper w teatrze polskim* (A List of Operas in the Polish Theater), a repertoire drawn up by Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski, and all the theater playbills in the library collections. He consulted the materials of actor Józef Majewski, known as the “chronicler of the Warsaw theater,” who supervised the wardrobes at the Rozmaitości Theater from 1842 until his death in 1855, leaving behind notebooks on the artists' biographies.²⁶ He also flipped through *Świat Dramatyczny* magazines, published in 1838–1840 by actor Wojciech Szymanowski, but made no use of them, deciding that the editors “had not fully exhausted the names from their predecessors' works.”²⁷ His research thus also takes into account a necessarily critical approach to his sources.

His initial list ready, he began collecting portraits, visiting “second-hand shops, and almost all the libraries,” and looking through “private individuals' collections.”²⁸ Apart from the collections of two Varsovians—Hipolit Skimborowicz, a writer and journalist interested in memorabilia from Warsaw's Freemason past, and Stanisław Marszałkiewicz, a miniature painter and lithographer who made many miniatures of theater folk, including Leontyna Halpertowa—he also looked into the Kraków collections of Andrzej Liskowski, “finding over a dozen heads sketched in pencil in the collections inherited from the painter's father.”²⁹ In May 1868, he described the project to a long-time friend, an actor of the provincial stages, Stanisław Krzesiński, mentioning some engravings for which he was still hunting:

If you can provide help, then send it, but not lithographs of Werowski, Szczurowski, and Kudlicz, which I have, but Szymanowski Marcin, Zdanowicz—these I'm missing. I would also like an engraving of Krasiński Square, where the Sary Theater is located—they remember it came out. Wouldn't that be a fine memento? At least I've heard no one disparage it. Should you find something

²⁶ Majewski's notes vanished before World War I (information from Prof. Stanisław Dąbrowski). Only Chomiński used Majewski's materials, see МТ, Chomiński, *Notaty*, 2 (note by Szwanowski).

²⁷ МТ, Chomiński, *Notaty*.

²⁸ МТ, Chomiński.

²⁹ МТ, Chomiński.

of the sort—or maybe a miniature, one with dates of birth and death—do send it along.³⁰

The closing sentence of the letter also attests to his sense of the project's gravity, and his knowledge of there being competition: "I am only withholding the list of names so that no one beats me to it!"³¹

A specific attribute of collecting is the "succession of desires," built on a sense of constant lack. According to Olivier Coron, "the collector is like a sailor on a sea of insatiability who never knows calm in a safe, quiet harbor."³² After several months of searching, Chomiński still felt a characteristic lack of appeasement: "I visited wherever there was even a shadow of a hope of making a find, but it's not enough."³³ In July 1868, he decided to expand his project: he made it public and this, in a sense, made it legal ("authorize the publication"). The announcement that appeared in *Kurier Warszawski* on July 3 is also the only document to describe the present shape of the project, including the number and variety of portraits involved. His notes also mention English, French, and German experiences in collecting theater history materials.

So far, very little has been done in this field in Poland; it is practically lying there fallow, awaiting scholars, commentators, and illustrators. In anticipation, therefore, of the fruits of efforts which we hope to be a finished work, we mark here many years' labor in collecting portraits of all of Warsaw's dramatic artists from 1764 to 1868. The gathering of these facsimiles has been undertaken by our stage artist, Michał Chomiński. As far as we know, this actor and archaeologist has so far collected 200 oil portraits, etchings, miniatures, daguerreotypes, and pastel, pen, and pencil drawings, and intends to publish the whole photographed gallery in a large format. Despite his most concerted efforts, some portraits remain missing. Thus, through our publication, Mr. Chomiński asks all those in possession or bearing information about where such portraits may definitely be found to give notice to the K. Brandel and Co. Photograph Studio, which has undertaken the task of creating this gallery.³⁴

³⁰ Małgorzata Kakiet, ed., "Z korespondencji Michała Chomińskiego 1857–1868," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 27, no. 1/2 (1978): 63. See also: Special Collections of the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, Collection of Mieczysław Rulikowski, no. 1295, Letters from Michał Chomiński to Stanisław Krzesiński, manuscript.

³¹ Kakiet, "Z korespondencji Chomińskiego," 63.

³² Olivier Coron, "Kolekcjoner i jego pasja," [Le collectionneur et sa passion] in *Kwiaty naszego życia*, ed. Joanna Zielińska (Toruń: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, 2008), quoted in Tańczuk, *Kolekcja—pamięć—tożsamość*, 85.

³³ мт, Chomiński, *Notaty*.

³⁴ *Kurier Warszawski* 48, no. 144 (1868): 1–2, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=720552>.

The next day, a similar announcement was printed in *Kurier Codzienny*, calling the project “a work that will be a History of Theaters” and calling “all lovers of art, relatives, or friends who possess these precious keepsakes, not to refrain from helping.”³⁵ From a letter to Krzesiński dated May, we know that Chomiński was after a portrait of esteemed character actor Józef Zdanowicz, who appeared on Warsaw’s stage in 1809–1839. In July he was still searching for it:

We know that two miniatures were made of the late Józef Zdanowicz by one of the finest miniature artists, one of them was burned in a fire in the home of the late Mr. Zdanowicz’s daughter, yet the other has survived, we only do not know in whose hands it remains; we expect the present owner of this treasure so valuable to posterity will want to share it with the public, for the pleasure of refreshing memories of the features of this brilliant thespian.³⁶

According to testimonials, Chomiński’s advertising of his project in magazines turned out to be effective, and his collection grew.

When he decided to write to all the theaters in Polish lands, searching for actors once belonging to the ensemble of Warsaw Theaters, the critical moment of the whole project arrived. Gathering portraits of artists of the past turned out to be easier than acquiring likenesses of his living and working colleagues. The everyday life of the actor—with learning new roles, morning rehearsals, and evening performances—did not help his work to progress.

The Final Selection

The most difficult part of the whole project was arranging a detailed list of not only names, but also information about the debuts and final roles of the various artists. Chomiński was aware that this information, based on the playbills, was not necessary for the gallery itself, “but this biographical outline could come in handy, if not for me, then perhaps for someone else.” Drawing up the final abstract, filled in with “notes more-or-less from private life,” took him nearly two years. The work was only finished on April 8, 1870. And then a moral dilemma surfaced: Did all the artists on the list have the right to appear in

³⁵ *Kurier Codzienny*, no. 145 (1868): 2, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/138697>.

³⁶ *Kurier Codzienny*, no. 145 (1868): 2.

the gallery? Chomiński's quandary gives us a sense of how he pondered his own identity ("he who does not love this profession will not devote his entire soul to it . . . this is an exploiter of liberty and independence, not an artist"³⁷). The solution he found—a discussion with a large group of his peers from the ensemble to determine the criteria³⁸—demonstrates his sense of the project's importance for the entire theater community. It was established that the safest criteria would be a contract as a performing artist, thus confirming the internal hierarchies, as it meant eliminating, for instance, all the members of the chorus. The key to the final list of contractual employees was thus the list of wages, from which Chomiński noted the relevant names from 1764–1870 (expanding the project by two years). This ushered in more complications and instilled doubts in the scrupulous and inquiring Chomiński, leading to more consultations, now with a former director of the Warsaw Theaters, Jan Tomasz Seweryn Jasiński.

Chomiński also gave thought to the decorative layout. He intended to fill in the gallery not only with images of the two theater buildings, as he had previously planned, but also with "all the buildings and structures" from 1764 to 1870, and panoramas of Warsaw "of yesterday and today, to signify the past and present." This idea was probably affected by the organizational changes introduced by the new chair of the governmental direction of the Warsaw Theaters, Sergiusz Muchanów. In June 1868, a ballet/opera production was renewed at the Na Wyspie Theater in Warsaw's Łazienki Park for the summer season, and in July 1870 a new building was opened—the Letni Theater at the Saski Garden. Both theaters enjoyed popularity and were frequently photographed. "The director not only concurred, he also praised the project, which chimed with my own affection, for not only had I conceived the plan to publish this group, but the whole layout and all the accessories were my notion and taste," Chomiński wrote. From the above letter to Krzesiński, we know that since 1868 the actor had been seeking engravings depicting the Sary Theater, that is, the edifice of the Narodowy Theater on Krasiński Square. He attained this only on September 8, 1870, which is also the date of the final entry on the project's progress. All that comes after is a vague note, from which we may deduce that the whole gallery was meant to be composed of 363 parts.

³⁷ мт, Chomiński, *Notaty*.

³⁸ The participants in the meeting were: Ludwik Panczykowski, Alojzy Żółkowski, Jan Królikowski, Alojzy Stolpe, Wincenty Rapacki, Jan Tatarkiewicz, Adolf Ostrowski, and Józef Surewicz.

Change

Two months later, in November 1870, *Kurier Warszawski* ran a note which said that “in the near future we will be releasing a gallery of portraits of all our dramatic artists.”³⁹ The cause of this publication was news of Bogumił Dawison sending in a portrait, to which was added a note that Chomiński had been “working hard at gathering materials for his gallery for over a dozen years and we ought to expect his work will receive recognition. It will provide illustrations to the history of our theaters.” This final sentence, stressing the illustrative nature of the images, deserves our attention, as it indirectly signals the change that occurred probably around 1870 in the author’s approach to the project, becoming one reason why his intentions were not carried out. The biographical information Chomiński noted down from source materials or stories of living actors, initially treated as a supplement to the portraits, began to command his attention. “Collectors always mark the boundaries of their collections, but these boundaries can sometimes become intangible,”⁴⁰ writes Tańczuk. In Chomiński’s approach we see traits of the collector who is “in the grip not of what is collected, but of collecting.”⁴¹ It would probably have been possible to create the gallery he dreamed of in 1870, yet he was increasingly drawn to the history of the theater and collecting biographical data.

This shift in perspective was initiated, perhaps, by Karol Estreicher, who returned to his native Kraków in 1868 to serve as director of the Jagiellonian Library. Estreicher’s interest in theater went back to 1847,⁴² but it was in the late 1860s and early 70s that he began publishing the results of his years of research. In 1871, he published the third book in his *Bibliografia polska XIX wieku* (Polish Bibliography of the Nineteenth Century) on the history of the theater and drama, and in 1873, the first volume of *Teatry w Polsce* (Theaters in Poland). In the above-quoted recollections of Chomiński, Estreicher writes:

He had no literary inclinations, and being self-taught, lacked the necessary education in this regard. Yet he longed to be of use, insofar as his talents

³⁹ *Kurier Warszawski* 50, no. 251 (1870): 2, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=721490>. The following quote is from the same source.

⁴⁰ Tańczuk, *Kolekcja—pamięć—tożsamość*, 86.

⁴¹ Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 24.

⁴² See Jan Michalik, “Zawsze ten sam! Estreicher i Pani Helena,” in *Helena Modrzejewska i jej przyjaciele*, ed. Alicja Kędziora and Emil Orzechowski (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2020), 280.

permitted. I encouraged him to gather artists' portraits and to append their biographies.⁴³

They forged more intensive contact in 1869:

he regaled me with questions that needed answering. He collected dates of artists' births and demises in the parishes. This was sometimes arduous work, because families often wanted "citizen" written in the death certificates, to avoid the deceased going down as an actor. This sort of vanity was not uncommon in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Estreicher's recollections take us behind the scenes of Chomiński's work. For the former, dates and biographical facts were of the greatest significance. It was he who encouraged Chomiński to begin working with Jasiński. "In 1872, after lengthy efforts, Chomiński secured Jasiński to begin preparing biographies for his work. He has already written more than fifty."⁴⁵ Details ran in the press:

The late Jasiński was gathering notes on the history of the theater, partly from books, partly from theater documents, journals, and his own memory. These he inserted in five thick notebooks titled *A Picture of Warsaw's Theaters from Their Origins to 1874 and Biographies of Warsaw's Stage Artists: A Contribution to the History of the Polish Theater*. These are freely arranged, by year, statistical data, facts, recollections, notes, and haphazardly organized. Yet they may serve as a supplement to Estreicher's work, and in them theater history will find raw material that could serve to resolve some doubts over facts.⁴⁶

Jasiński did not work disinterestedly; Chomiński paid for it.⁴⁷ "Impoverished, barely surviving off his wages, Chomiński offered him 2,000 Polish zloty in cash for those five notebooks, quite considerable money for an actor at the time."⁴⁸ He continued working with Jasiński until the latter's demise in 1879. Back in April 1878,

⁴³ Estreicher, *Michał Chomiński*, 16.

⁴⁴ Estreicher, 16.

⁴⁵ Estreicher, 17.

⁴⁶ Mefisto [Aleksander Rajchman], "Ze wspomnień o śp. Michale Chomińskim," *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, no. 161 (1886): 448, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/414285>.

⁴⁷ In his edition of the *Notaty*, Szwankowski recalls that Jasiński agreed to do the work as he needed "money to cure his rheumatism in Italy," мт, Chomiński, *Notaty*, 26. For more on Jasiński's collaboration with Chomiński, see pages 25–26.

⁴⁸ мт, Chomiński, 26.

Modrzejewska had written to Jasiński, whom she affectionately called “Daddy”: “I am sending Mr. Chomiński my photograph through Daddy. Please hand it to him and tell him I am very, very grateful that he remembered me.”⁴⁹ All signs seem to show that Chomiński kept collecting pictorial materials, yet he was more and more consumed by gathering information from the past of the theater and recording his impressions from his day, which he viewed as parts of his collection. “Chomiński saw Jasiński’s work as a valuable treasure, in which he delighted, reading about the bygone history and correcting, supplementing, and continuing it into the present day.”⁵⁰

It is highly possible that the unrealized gallery project was modified by the artist himself and was meant to take the form of a “book” or “album of Warsaw actors.” This was Szwankowski’s interpretation.⁵¹ He quoted a letter from Chomiński to Estreicher, failing to mention the source of the correspondence, and pointed to the high print costs, “owing to the lithographing of a few hundred actors’ portraits,”⁵² as the reason why he gave up on “publishing a book.”

The interest in biography and change in the project’s form align with a maturing process characteristic of the Polish intelligentsia in the period after the January Uprising. “In forging an intelligent ethos and the social negotiation of values in which it should be rooted, a substantial role was played by biographies, which readers found attractive,”⁵³ writes Ewa Partyga. The growing number of dramatic artists’ profiles in the Warsaw press after 1863 indicates the gradual social advancement of their profession. Of the 420 profiles published in the popular *Kłosa* and *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* magazines in 1863–1872, twenty-one were for dramatic artists. Moreover, among them was a profile of Ignacy Chomiński, Michał’s brother, put together by Jan Królikowski, who was aware of the gallery project.⁵⁴

We know that Michał Chomiński went from being the creator of an actors’ portrait gallery to a chronicler of the theater whose work other authors would consult because this is how he was remembered. In *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, after Chomiński passed away, they even wrote:

Right up to his passing he enthusiastically fulfilled the duty K. Estreicher gave him of recording memories of himself and his colleagues, with backstage

⁴⁹ Helena Modrzejewska to Jan S. Jasiński, letter 270, in *Modrzejewska: Listy 1*, ed. Alicja Kędziora and Emil Orzechowski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2015), 427.

⁵⁰ Mefisto, “Ze wspomnień o Chomińskim,” 448.

⁵¹ M.T., Chomiński, *Notaty*, 25, 27.

⁵² M.T., Chomiński, 25.

⁵³ Ewa Partyga, *Wiek XIX: Przedstawienia* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2016), 71.

⁵⁴ Cf. Partyga, 71–82.

details, of which, as an unbiased and just observer, he could be the finest chronicler for years.⁵⁵

The Journal

In 1874, Michał Chomiński retired, after thirty-five years on stage. Without relinquishing his appearances in the Warsaw Theaters, he gave himself to his chronicling passions. The work he wrote until his death in 1886 was most often called a journal. Posthumous articles stressed the value of its entries, while pointing out the lack of literary skill to turn the scrupulously collected information into a coherent narrative.

No notes were more dear to him than the theater chronicles. He noted the dates from the lives of the outstanding artists, but was also interested in details of the lives of chorus members and extras. . . . Each of Chomiński's roles, like his notebooks, were filled with the tiniest of details, which he gathered with no critical eye. His journal was abundant material *in crudo*, yet it required segregating.⁵⁶

Work with Jasiński meant that Chomiński was reduced to merely supplementing the director's work. Władysław Bogusławski's verdict is telling here:

We know that he collected covertly, gathering and rooting out what he could: notes, portraits, and keepsakes. He and Jasiński intended to use this as material for his history of the theater, which was also the dream of his friend the director, who was professionally trained for this task. . . . For the future chronicler of the theater, Jasiński's work was crucial, and Chomiński's modest contribution is also warmly recalled, as warmly as the memory of an artist among his colleagues and the public.⁵⁷

Directly after Chomiński's passing, *Wiek* reported that the materials he had gathered were apparently held in the Jagiellonian Library, and that Estreicher

⁵⁵ MG [Marian Gawalewicz], "Michał Chomiński," *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 8, no. 200 (1886): 283, <https://polona.pl/item/tygodnik-illustrowany-seria-4-t-8-nr-200-30-pazdziernika-1886,Nzk5NT11Ng/12/#item>.

⁵⁶ Mefisto, "Ze wspomnień o Chomińskim," 448.

⁵⁷ Władysław Bogusławski, "Michał Chomiński," *Kurier Warszawski* 66, no. 295 (1886): 2, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/publication/766621/edition/728416/content>.

had consulted them in writing “his History of the Polish theater,”⁵⁸ as *Teatr w Polsce* (Theater in Poland) was called. This news was corrected by Estreicher, who stressed that “no one provided the substance for my published work, and in fact the material gathered by the dearly departed Chomiński rests untouched in its folders, examined by no one.”⁵⁹ He also confirmed that the Jagiellonian Library was chiefly interested in collecting playbills from Kraków and Warsaw. Chomiński had sent in Warsaw playbills. Moreover, he sent schedules every week to the Kraków library.

Apart from the playbills, a one-page list of plays running throughout the week in Warsaw is published. This schedule was assembled by a director, Chęciński, beginning November 1, 1868. Chomiński mainly wrote schedule changes on the margins of these lists over the course of the week, and sometimes notes on appearances by newcomers, commemorations of artists, or backstage feuds . . . sometimes he gave his opinions on his colleagues.⁶⁰

Actor and director Józef Kotarbiński made mention of these notes:

In Chomiński’s off-the-cuff notes there are, however, interesting details and materials for the historian of the Polish stage. I have glanced several times at the Jagiellonian Library’s collection of printed Repertoires of Government Theaters in Warsaw, on which he made various notes.⁶¹

The value of these notes was most fully appreciated by Władysław Krogulski. Estreicher had called Chomiński “a collector of stage-related materials,”⁶² while Krogulski saw in the chaos of notes an accumulation of impressions, photographic shots of moments that suited the chaotic reality of the theater.

How much valuable information could be gained from those scattered facts, spontaneously jotted after roles, whose greatest value is that they were written in the heat of the moment—even that disorder, that chaos in their notation

⁵⁸ *Wiek* 14, no. 239 (1886): 3, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/253186>.

⁵⁹ Estreicher, *Michał Chomiński*, 4.

⁶⁰ Estreicher, 17–18.

⁶¹ Józef Kotarbiński, *Aktorzy i aktorki* (Warszawa: Mazowiecka Spółka Wydawnicza, 1924), 97, <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/310833/edition/293721/content>.

⁶² Estreicher, *Michał Chomiński*, 4.

style, so faithful to life in the theater, never conforming to any one system, is not, I believe, without its special value.⁶³

Question Marks

Posthumous articles also inquired into the collections' storage place and their further fate. Two days after Chomiński died, a mysterious note appeared in *Kurier Warszawski*:

We have heard that a theater lover in possession of valuable materials on the history of the Polish theater, and of the Warsaw theater in particular, intends to approach the late Michał Chomiński's family with the aim of acquiring the diverse theater-related collections he left behind. It would be most desirable if the entire and, as we are assured, valuable collection of portraits, manuscripts, playbills, etc. ended up in the hands of someone who could make proper use of them.⁶⁴

Did someone indeed purchase them? This we do not know. When, in 1901, Władysław Krogulski began publishing his notebooks in *Kurier Teatralny*, he bemoaned the fact that he had access to only a small portion of Chomiński's notes.⁶⁵ His recollections of Michał Chomiński concluded with a series of questions: "Apparently he had a very large collection of old engravings, artists' portraits etc., where are they? Apparently he wrote fascinating journals of the theater scene, where are they? And for that matter, where are Jasiński's collections?"⁶⁶

The Collector

Collection studies knows the concept of "an identity of a collection." Tańczuk recalls Russell Belk's notion, by which:

⁶³ Krogulski, *Notatki starego aktora*, 162.

⁶⁴ *Kurier Warszawski* 66, no. 297b (1886): 3, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/publication/766625/edition/728420/content>.

⁶⁵ Krogulski, *Notatki starego aktora*, 162.

⁶⁶ Krogulski, 169.



Ignacy Chomiński, ca. 1868

MUSEUM OF KRAKOW

collections, like other material goods belonging to an individual, can be seen as parts of an “expanding self.” They include objects of the following categories: “a body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences, and those places and things to which a person feels attached.”⁶⁷

If a “collection can surely be regarded as part of the collector’s ‘self,’”⁶⁸ we should seek the beginnings of Chomiński’s passion for collecting, without which there would have been no “idea to publish the gallery,” in his life and work. Exploring his identity will also reveal other possible reasons why his project did not come to fruition.

⁶⁷ Tańczuk, *Kolekcja—pamięć—tożsamość*, 119–120.

⁶⁸ Tańczuk, 120.



Ignacy Chomiński,
Kłosy, no. 163 (1868)

Memory

Three types are singled out among people amassing objects: “the gatherer, the collector, and the possessor”; their objects are their “keepsakes, collection, or property.”⁶⁹ The first two categories pertain to Chomiński:

The first type gathers objects owing to their shared experiences and memories. Sometimes through the owner (or collector), the objects acquire a personal color, making a collection. For collecting is not only about gathering objects, though expanding the collection is an integral part. A collection gives rise to a personal idea, albeit a curious one. A true collector makes a collection based

⁶⁹ Harasym, *Ze starego albumu*, 9.

on knowledge of a given field, while drawing joy and satisfaction from it, for collecting is a passion.⁷⁰

It seems that in Michał Chomiński's life story we can glean a "personal idea" that brought about his collection and the transformation of its owner from a gatherer to a collector, though he was never acknowledged to be one.

Susan Sontag wrote: "People robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers."⁷¹ Chomiński was not a photographer, but he surrounded himself with photographers. His life was marked by loss and death right from childhood. When he was five, his father orphaned him, and three years later, his mother followed suit.⁷² The teenage Michał joined the theater ensemble of his stepfather, Tomasz Chelchowski, and then was linked to the theater until the end of his life. Initially this was an itinerant theater, where, at eleven years old, he began playing children; later, in 1840–1846, he joined a Kraków theater, and then, from 1846 to 1886, he acted in the Warsaw Theaters. His elder brother, Ignacy, also ended up in his stepfather's ensemble, following such youthful misadventures as running away from home and joining the army. Ignacy played lovers and heroes, while Michał was on the other end of the thespian hierarchy. The brothers were to move from Kraków together to work on the Warsaw stage. Yet on December 1, 1846, Ignacy died in tragic circumstances. Arrested for supporting the Kraków revolution, he was sentenced to twenty years' exile in the Caucasus. On the way he tried to flee, was wounded, and captured; he died in a hospital in Siedlce. We can read of the mental illness that plagued him, also leading to his demise.⁷³ Michał Chomiński visited his grave in Siedlce every year.

"His brother's memory was sacred to him, so sacred that he would not defile it even in conversation—when asked about some detail concerning Ignacy, he would be curt and sad, saying: 'Such a shame.'"⁷⁴ Chomiński kept a photograph of Ignacy. According to Jerzy Got, it was a talbotype taken in Kraków in the spring of 1846 or even earlier, in 1845, probably by photographer Walery Maliszewski.⁷⁵ Estreicher claimed it was a daguerreotype of Ignacy that was in Michał Chomiński's first collection. This is difficult to verify, as the original

⁷⁰ Harasym, 9.

⁷¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 10.

⁷² As an adult, he was swiftly widowed; he lived till the end of his days with his only daughter and her children after the death of her husband, violinist Karol Studziński. See Krogulski, *Notatki starego aktora*, 166.

⁷³ See Krogulski, 152.

⁷⁴ Krogulski, 153.

⁷⁵ Got, "Fotograficzna dokumentacja teatru w Polsce," 72.

has not survived to our day. What has survived is a photographic reproduction of the original, commissioned by Chomiński around 1868 at the Warsaw photography studio of Walery Twardzicki, presumably for the gallery. The original served as a basis for lithographic prints, which helped commemorate the late actor.⁷⁶ Signs seem to show, however, that the likeness of Ignacy indicated by Estreicher was a photograph with a personal story behind it, one that initiated the collection and gallery project, and thus the impulse to preserve the memory of actors and the theater.

The posthumous recollections of Chomiński's extraordinary helpfulness and care for those most in need were not purely a matter of convention. "Chomiński was known to everyone, and not just in the theater, as their most trusted friend, ready to come to their aid in any way."⁷⁷ There are lists of his specific and timely actions, in which we see him consistently working toward a goal and his organizational skills. He arranged help for a veteran of the rural stage, Jan Okoński, securing him a home in a village and asking members of the Warsaw ensemble to draw a tiny sum from their monthly wage, which, pooled together, sufficed to support the ailing actor.⁷⁸ Chomiński's concern went hand-in-hand with his enormous respect for the theater and his work: "Let's respect each other, gentlemen!" was his favorite phrase, sometimes repeated by younger actors backstage with a snide chuckle.⁷⁹

The Hierarchy

In Chomiński, respect for the theater was joined with loyalty and devotion to its hierarchy. In its throwback column, *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne* wrote:

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" we ask a tired old man.

"Oh . . . songstress x has just arrived from Lwów."

"And why should that concern you?"

"What do you mean," he replies, staring agape with his big, earnest eyes,

"Miłaszewski wrote me about her, asking me to tend to her. And what Miłaszewski commands I must do, he's my pal, a Kraków actor. What a man of his sort commands is sacred to me . . ."

⁷⁶ Got, 72.

⁷⁷ Bogustawski, "Michał Chomiński," 2.

⁷⁸ Mefisto, "Ze wspomnień o Chomińskim," 448.

⁷⁹ MG, "Michał Chomiński," 283.

PHOTO KONRAD BRANDEL, 1866



Michał Chomiński as Pazurkiewicz in *Żydzi* (The Jews) by Józef Korzeniowski

MUSEUM OF KRAKÓW

And Michał climbed three floors of the hotel every day, conscientiously carrying out the mission given to him by the Kraków actor!⁸⁰

In the hierarchy at the heart of the nineteenth-century theater, Chomiński held a very low position. “He never occupied a great place, and yet was always a strong link in the chain. He played supporting roles, comedic ones, often servants, confidants, parvenues, and Jews,”⁸¹ Estreicher wrote. He was known to be highly industrious. He had around 500 roles to his credit, playing almost 200 on the

⁸⁰ Mefisto, “Ze wspomnień o Chomińskim,” 448.

⁸¹ Estreicher, *Michał Chomiński*, 5.

Kraków stage in 1843–1845 alone.⁸² In a theater hierarchy that divided actors into first-rung, second-rung, and third-rung, he was of the lowest, yet was an important useful force. "Knowing his strengths well, he did not push himself out in front, did not vie for tasks he could not fulfill,"⁸³ they wrote after his death.

His awareness of his position probably led him to form the tightest friendships with actors higher in the hierarchy. His brother was a lover and aspired to play heroes. Two of his closest friends and peers were Józef Rychter, a character actor, and Jan Królikowski, who reached the summit of the thespian hierarchy, becoming a tragedian. They met in the 1837/38 season, in the traveling ensemble of Chomiński's stepfather; later the three of them appeared on a Kraków stage. Rychter was first to move to Warsaw, in 1845, the other two joining him a year later. Chomiński's friendship with Królikowski went down in Polish theater legend as a clear lesson on hierarchy:

The least outstanding of the three, Chomiński, truly worshiped Królikowski: when Jan performed, Chomiński had to be in the theater for at least a moment, you could always find him in a corner, more moved by his friend's acting than even by his own first time in a role. When Królikowski left the stage, something snapped in Chomiński, his mood soured, he only tended to the ill man, and finally grew indifferent to the theater when the great artist shut his eyes for good. Although Chomiński was still performing last week, all his theater colleagues sensed he would not endure the blow. "I'm the last of the three," he repeated, "I must follow them, follow my Jan." And so he did.⁸⁴

Jan Królikowski passed away on September 11, 1886; just over a month later, on October 24, Chomiński died as well.

From today's perspective it is hard to understand how far the theater hierarchy determined the lives of actors and how they were posthumously remembered. In a recollection of Michał Chomiński, we read:

Another stage veteran has gone to the grave. In Królikowski an epochal artist passed away, a man of great aspirations, one of those who push art forward, producing respect for it and forever waging a fight—for art. Michał Chomiński

⁸² Among the enormous number of characters he created over nearly fifty years, we should mention Papkin in *Zemsta* (*Revenge*) and Kacperek in *Nikt mnie nie zna* (*No One Knows Me*) by Aleksander Fredro, and the tailor Michał Igiełka in *Der böse Geist Lumpacivagabundus* (*The Evil Spirit Lumpazivagabundus*) by Johann Nestroy. His final role was Łykalski in the one-act *Majster i czeladnik* (*Master and Journeyman*) by Józef Korzeniowski.

⁸³ MG, "Michał Chomiński," 283.

⁸⁴ *Wiek 8*, no. 238 (1886): 2, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/253187>.

PHOTO KONRAD BRANDEL



Michał Chomiński, ca. 1870

MUSEUM OF KRAKOW

leaves behind conscientious usefulness, a worthy companion to the great artists, one of those honest craftsmen who, without raising the flag high, respect it, remain true to it, full of adoration for its crests, yet far from those summits scaled by those more fortunate, by those more talented.⁸⁵

In the nineteenth century could a supporting actor become the author of the *Gallery of Dramatic Artists of the Warsaw Theaters*? The originality of Chomiński's project partly came from its visual nature. In the testimonial in which he described his idea, he was most proud of his composition, of the

⁸⁵ Aleksander Rajchman, "Michał Chomiński," *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, no. 161 (1886): 446-447, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/414285>.

layout of the whole group. Over time his enthusiasm and passion for the project turned into a scrupulous diligence in completing the task given to him by the theater community. A task for an actor of "conscientious usefulness." He became a "collector of stage materials," as Estreicher put it, and the man who completed Jasiński's profiles, making a "modest contribution" to the whole work, as Bogusławski wrote. Chomiński's extensive collections could merely serve to illustrate a written history of the theater, to illustrate biographical tales. Interestingly, Chomiński's project was seen in the same logocentric fashion in the twentieth century. Szwankowski, who edited the actor's text, did not hesitate to interpret the gallery as a book or album. Raszewski assumed that Chomiński aimed to "create a complete who's-who of theater personalities." Although the actor's wealth of pictures was termed a collection, he himself was never called a collector.

Describing the process of making museum collections from private photography collections, Zbigniew Harasym recalls that the National Library collections in Warsaw

began in part from the Zamoyski archive from Podzamcze, the Ignacy Kraszewski collection, the collection of Warsaw historian and journalist Aleksander Kraushar, the collection of Lwów archivist and historian Aleksander Czołowski, and the collection of Zenon Przesmycki.⁸⁶

It is hard to imagine Chomiński in this company. His background and social and economic position as a nuts-and-bolts actor whose greatest artistic achievement was Papkin in Fredro's *Revenge* excluded him from the company of collectors, who would have been from the aristocracy or the intelligentsia. He was treated as a gatherer, and, as Krzysztof Pomian has stressed, a patronizing approach to gatherers is typical:

a collector is only taken seriously when he manipulates large sums of money. Only when a collection is made for investment purposes, is locked up in a bank vault and is worth more than its weight in gold does it impress; anything else is perceived merely as a narcissistic and slightly frivolous pastime—nothing more than a trifle.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Harasym, *Stare fotografie*, 11.

⁸⁷ Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, 1.

The question marks concluding Krogulski's recollections of the actor, symbolizing the wasted disarray of Chomiński's collection, had such a strong effect on Krogulski's imagination that he himself decided to take precautions with his own collection, donating it to the Jagiellonian Library after his death.⁸⁸

In the 1930s, Michał Chomiński's notes and Jasiński's profiles of actors found their way into the hands of theater historian Mieczysław Rulikowski,⁸⁹ and in 1951 they were purchased from his widow, Janina Rulikowska,⁹⁰ ending up in the Polish Academy of Sciences Art Institute archives. "We do not know by what path the manuscript traveled from Chomiński's daughter Studzińska to the hands of the worthy scholar Rulikowski,"⁹¹ wrote Szwankowski. The pictorial materials have scattered, unfortunately, though we have testimonies from Chomiński and his contemporaries that the collection was complete. Wincenty Rapacki wrote, "All his life he collected photographs of actors that passed through the Warsaw stage, he collected them all."⁹² It is quite possible that the photographs made their way to Stanisław Dąbrowski, who, since the 1920s, had combined his work as an actor with a passion for theater history and had gathered an impressive collection of theater paraphernalia, including nineteenth-century theater photographs.⁹³ It is thus highly possible that photographs from Chomiński's collection served as the basis for volume one of *Słownik biograficzny teatru polskiego 1765–1965* (A Biographical Dictionary of Polish Theater 1765–1965). Other collections of nineteenth-century theater photography, such as those at the Theater Museum in Warsaw or the Theater Branch of the Kraków Museum, may also be indebted to this scattered collection.

The unrealized gallery project could be emblematic of an eternal theme—the gaps in Polish theater scholarship on the history of the nineteenth-century Warsaw stage.⁹⁴ Michał Chomiński was the first to appreciate the value of theater photography as a document; he was the first collector of theater portraits, the creator of an original photography project, and a chronicler of the Warsaw theater.

⁸⁸ Krogulski, *Notatki starego aktora*, 170, 47.

⁸⁹ See Raszewski, introduction.

⁹⁰ МТ, Chomiński, *Notaty*, 1.

⁹¹ МТ, Chomiński, 1. The notes have recently been appreciated as a source and used by Dorota Jarząbek-Wasył, *Za kulisami: Narodziny przedstawienia w teatrze polskim XIX wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016), 22–23. She cites the manuscript inventory numbers from the collections of the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, and documents that were published.

⁹² Wincenty Rapacki, *Sto lat sceny polskiej w Warszawie* (Warszawa, 1925), 122, <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/7220>.

⁹³ See entry under: "Stanisław Dąbrowski," in *Słownik biograficzny teatru polskiego 1900–1980*, ed. Zbigniew Wilski et al. (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1994), 156–159.

⁹⁴ On the gaps in research on the history of the Warsaw theater in the period between the uprisings, see Halina Waszkiel, "Warszawski Hamlet: Dylematy historiograficzne," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 69, no. 4 (2020): 156, <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.132>.

It seems he was very near to bringing the project to completion. It would have sufficed to arrange the photographs he had collected on cardboard and make large prints. Let us imagine such a *tableau* on a wall in the foyer of the National Theater in Warsaw, while recalling that "a collection is not a representation. A collection is a *simulacrum*."⁹⁵ These words best describe the effect of Chomiński's scattered photography collection, which continues to give us images of the theater of the past.

Appendix

An adapted version of Michał Chomiński's introduction to his *Notaty do życia teatru warszawskiego XIX wieku* (Notes on the Warsaw Theater Scene in the Nineteenth Century), ed. Eugeniusz Szwanowski, Theater Museum in Warsaw, typescript, no. d.642/III, 1–10. Punctuation updated. Notes for this edition prepared by Agnieszka Wanicka. The English translation retains the characteristics of the author's style.

A few words on the idea to publish the Gallery of Dramatic Artists of the Warsaw Theaters: after parting with photographer Józef Bejer⁹⁶ in 1865 (all this in Warsaw), Konrad Brandel founded a photo studio with painter Marcin Olszyński.⁹⁷ I shall remain silent on why the studio failed to turn a profit, suffice to say they tried, yet there were few results. Brandel tried everything: he asked Jan Królikowski and myself, having known his parents and Konrad from childhood, to have our pictures taken in costume, as artists; Królikowski was first, then me. We agreed to this inconvenience so as to help a young artist get started, because he could turn the pictures to his advantage. Królikowski dressed in twelve roles, I did twelve as well, but the public was not interested, for they were too expensive. Konrad undertook a second idea and announced he was taking special groups. This brought them in a fair amount [of income] at first, but not regularly; to draw the public they often changed their window display. I arrived early at the studio when they were arranging all the groups in a large format (insofar as they fit) to be part of a single frame. Seeing so many statuses, vocations, crafts, stations etc. I began to regret that the occupation that is most alive, that is the basis of morality (for they see everything tangibly), what affects education, is entirely missing. I asked why they had not yet made the effort to get a group of dramatic artists, opera singers, to which he replied he had no contacts and did not know everyone so as to invite them for a group photograph. I gave them a way of getting

⁹⁵ Michał Paweł Markowski, "Kolekcja: między autonomią a reprezentacją," *Teksty Drugie*, no. 4 (1997): 103, <https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/72640/edition/66493/content>.

⁹⁶ A slip of the tongue, the reference is to photographer Karol Beyer (1818–1877).

⁹⁷ Konrad Brandel (1838–1920), a student and coworker of Karol Beyer, founded a photo studio in 1865 with his brother, Władysław, and Marcin Olszyński, Konrad Brandel and Co., on Nowy Świat Street 57 (no. 1249).

around these invitations, collecting tickets⁹⁸ already taken by photographer friends, arranging them into medallions, signing each, then grouping and publishing them. They raised a second obstacle, for between them (the photographers) there was such jealousy (which I scarcely believe—this was an excuse to avoid doing the project, or at least not to spend money on the tickets, if their purchase was necessary) that they would suspect our aim and refuse to sell them. At first, upon hearing this illogical objection, I took it for reluctance and spoke of it no more. A moment later, Mr. Olszyński reiterated that it had long been his intention to collect a group of artists, and they sought to approach me, as a closer acquaintance, in this matter, they were only concerned if I would be receptive. (I thought to myself—more rubbish), I replied that (my colleagues and I) could not be gathered up in an hour, but that my album⁹⁹ has them all, I would make things easier for him and loan it. They corrected me—it would not be a loan, but a gift, for I would not be getting them back. Here I felt sorry to lose the set I had collected with such effort and cost, but I am soft when it comes to favors. I thought: when I ask someone—they give it to me.

Returning home, I picked up my album and began to feel emotional over losing it, when I inadvertently turned my attention to the wall where I had hung engravings by Kudlicz, Piasecki, and others; I thought I'd include them. I was fond of this idea, but then a second one came along: why stop half way, why not start from the founding of the Polish theater in Warsaw? I wondered if it would be possible and how to go about it, I looked through the works of the late Wojciech Bogusławski, and spotting a few engravings by the profiles of bygone artists,¹⁰⁰ I began to think that, with a bit of effort, I could track down portraits, engravings, silhouettes, pencil,¹⁰¹ in a word, anything that could resemble a physiognomy. I was swayed by this thought but knew not how it would be taken by the public, if photography could contain it all. I began by consulting Mr. Brandel and Mr. Olszyński; they liked the idea a great deal, adding a view of the present theater building,¹⁰² which I in turn liked. I added that the old theater could be added for actors past,¹⁰³ and the present one for today's. They praised the project, and with all enthusiasm I got down to supplying the materials to make it.

I went to the theater library, and being in warm contact with J. Królikowski, a dramatic artist, I confided in him the project and noted the impression it made on him: he thought it over, nodded his head, and said it was very fine, but how to do it, where to look? One might imagine as I grew up that he found no objections, only the task was hard. I embraced him for it and let him have peace of mind. With a more assured eye I visited librarian

⁹⁸ I.e. photographs.

⁹⁹ The actor had been collecting photographs since at least 1847.

¹⁰⁰ The reference is to a volume of *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego na trzy części podzielone oraz Wiadomość o życiu sławnych artystów przez Wojciecha Bogusławskiego* published in 1820 (see note 23). Part Three, containing biographical information about actors, was illustrated with portraits. These are the first lithographs to depict the artists of the National Theater ensemble.

¹⁰¹ Szwankowski notes here: "pencil drawings."

¹⁰² A photograph of the Wielki Theater building on Teatralny Square was inserted in the *Calendar for 1866*, in the upper left-hand corner. See Lejko, *Kalendarze fotograficzne*, 20.

¹⁰³ That is, the Narodowy Theater on Krasiński Square.



Józefa Ledóchowska (née Truskolaska), *Rocznik Teatru Narodowego*

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Józef Świergocki (himself a former artist, today retired) to ask if for such-and-such an aim I could have the library's assistance and, in the event of a lack of portraits or engravings, they would allow me to use the busts of the deceased in the library. My question was overheard by Florentyn Gwozdecki (serving for chairman Aleksander Hauke, theater director, also a former actor and props manager), who not only praised the publication, but declared that I could take everything, should it prove necessary. Świergocki promptly gave me the *Dzieła* (Works) by the late Wojciech Bogusławski, in which, alongside the profiles of artists of days past, there is a full set of portraits, and gave me theater yearbooks with an engraving of the late Józefa Ledóchowska.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ A reference to *Roczniki Teatru Narodowego Warszawskiego* of 1807–16. In the 1809 yearbook is a lithograph of Józefa Ledóchowska (née Truskolaska), see <https://polona.pl/item/rocznik-teatru-narodowego-warszawskiego-1-stycznia-1809-1-stycznia-1810,MjgoMjxxNTQ/o/#info:metadata>.

On October 17, 1867 I began investigating which artists had been employed by the Warsaw stage from 1764 onward (for the gallery would include only dramatic artists and only Varsovians). By the time I looked through all the publications and relevant notes half a year had passed, for they had no special list of artists, and until 1800 the playbills did not mention the cast, so I was forced to separate the wheat from the chaff. After a great deal of digging I had a list of artists from Wojciech Bogusławski's *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego* (The History of the National Theater), theater yearbooks from 1807 to 1814, the repertoire of L. A. Dmuszewski and all the playbills in the library of the Warsaw theaters. I also scanned the notes of Józef Majewski and *Świat Dramatyczny*, published by Wojciech Szymanowski (all the above were artists), but did not rely on them, for they did not provide an exhaustive list of names from the works of their predecessors.

By that time I knew whom to seek, and got down to collecting portraits, going around to the second-hand shops, almost all the libraries, the private collections, making most use of Hipolit Skimborowicz's, the miniature painter Marszałkiewicz's, and chiefly, that of Andrzej Liskowski, a Cracovian whose collection inherited from his painter father held over a dozen heads drawn in pencil. For those several months I made these efforts myself and went around to all those where there was even a shadow of a hope, but it was still not enough. To get the public's attention and formalize the publication, I advertised on July 3, 1868 in magazines,¹⁰⁵ asking anyone in possession of such portraits to submit them to be photographed at Brandel and Co. This ad caused kind souls to come to my aid with a few items. I sent out letters to all the Polish theaters and artists once belonging to the Directors' Office of the Warsaw Theaters to send in their portraits and the information I was missing. This caused a real delay; when I was dependent on the living, I could not badger them for photographs, and every day was slipping by, for we are getting older, and I wanted to collect as much as I could from when the actors entered the profession in all the beauty of their youth, as this would be interesting and attractive, and impossible to capture at present. My colleagues were in no hurry to hand over their portraits, I never completed the list of more artists for the photographer (writing their surnames and putting them in chronological groups), and that is because I was performing frequently and always learning new roles, so I did not have enough free time to note down everyone who entered and left the profession.

First I made the list of names from the playbill at the theater library, but that took a great deal of time, because I had to explain to everyone what I was doing, and in time it turned out to be inaccurate. So I asked them to let me take the playbills home, and gaining this permission, I decided to make a list of all the artists: when they began and finished their career, and with what role, for though these details were not necessary for the gallery of artists, perhaps they would serve someone else making a similar overview of biographies.

Once again I began a detailed list of every artist (with notes on their private lives, more or less). Concluding (a rough draft) on April 8, 1870, the list of all those who appeared in dramas, I was persuaded that not everyone deserves to appear in that artists' gallery, for

¹⁰⁵ See *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 144 (1868) and *Kurier Codzienny*, no. 145 (1868).

whosoever does not love the craft, whosoever does not give it all their soul, and stay in it to test their mettle, putting off the time and speculations when they will retire and seek other work, this person has but exploited freedom and independence, and is not an artist; there are those who, given several years, show no talent, yet they enjoy the free life and they remain in the profession, and all the more they do not deserve the name, for in their delusions they are tyrants over themselves, squandering that golden period—their youth!

Not wanting to take responsibility in the eyes of my colleagues and the public for misplacing or omitting someone working in the profession, on April 14, 1870 I invited my elder colleagues, Ludwik Panczykowski, Alojzy Żółkowski, Jan Królikowski, Alojzy Stolpe, Wincenty Rapacki, Jan Tatkiewicz, Adolf Ostrowski, and Józef Surewicz (Władysław Świerzewski had gone to his mother's funeral in Płock), to help me complete the gallery and advise on the posts and relations of the actors, how to see and arrange them.

It was resolved that those who did not last in the profession, forced out of it, perhaps, by circumstances, accidents, intrigues, and so could not be omitted, for if they had remained, they may have amounted to something in the profession. Those who were less talented could not be punished by being overlooked either, for it was not their fault they had no room to hone their craft, in a word, we were to find space for all those who had contracts as dramatic artists; on the other hand, those who often appeared in comedies and were on the list of chorus members could be omitted. I wanted to publish their conclusions, for I am certain that when they come out, opinions will vary: I have neither the right, nor could pretend to, which is why I wanted to publicize their views, so that the accusations should not land on me. Yet my colleagues asked me not to, so I decided to put it off until I began to arrange the photographs on the cardboard, and then I would announce our resolution.

To determine who was on the list of dramatic artists, the pay list had to be consulted: I went to the theater cashier to browse the books, finding imprecisions here too . . .¹⁰⁶ Having noted down the pay list, I organized the list of artists and moved on to writing out a good copy, I approached former director J. S. Jasiński with questions: Should those who appeared on the pay list of dramatic artists but not on the playbills take their place in the gallery? "No." Those who are on the lists of chorus members but no longer belonged to them, merely played in the comedies—Rutkowska Salomea, Buliński Stanisław, Maślowski Piotr—include them or not? "Include them" (because only laziness kept them from being transferred to the list of dramatic actors). The married women who changed their name, was I to mention their maiden names? "Yes." I noted from the playbills how Lithuanian and foreign women's surnames were once spelled. Until 1835, the playbills used the "owa" feminine suffix for names, e.g. Aszpergerowa, Naciewiczówna 1821,¹⁰⁷ and this form I have kept, for I am not at liberty to correct the style,

¹⁰⁶ We omit the digressive description of Chomiński's problems locating the pay list. The oldest list he found, in Bogustawski's hand, came from 1810. According to Chomiński, the pay lists were only systematically introduced in 1814, though in 1814–1837 they were incomplete. Only from 1838 to 1852 were the books kept "in an orderly fashion" Chomiński only reviewed the pay list books until 1852. He knew the list of those employed in the following years from his own experience.

¹⁰⁷ Aniela Naciewicz debuted at the Narodowy Theater in 1817, but only in 1821, after Józefa Ledóchowska left for Wilno (today: Vilnius, Lithuania), did she frequently appear on stage, taking most of the famed tragedian's roles.

even if it is archaic (though we may ask: was the old way not more proper?). How to mark the year an artist took a husband? I presented my method, and the director agreed. Should the year of artists' death be noted if they perished soon after leaving the theater? "It should." I told the director that to conclude, as an ornament, and a point of interest and even propriety, I wanted to include all the buildings in which the theater performances were staged from 1764 to 1870, as well as a panorama of Warsaw of yesterday and today, to signify the past and present. The director not only concurred, he also praised the project, which chimed with my own affection, for not only had I conceived the plan to publish this group, but the whole layout and all the accessories were my notion and taste. I had to do a lot of walking around to find a view of how the old theater on Krasiński Square looked, and I don't know how to explain it, because I practically began with our decorator, Michał Groński, asking if he had a drawing. He replied that he didn't, and after my insistence he promised to fix the photograph as it once was (he had it in his memory). I gave him the photograph and waited two years for the repair, finally he promised me a copy precisely from nature, and indeed, I was in his theater studio on September 8, 1870 and he gave me a view of the whole side of the building taken in 1829 by A. Sacchetti with a guard house, in which I want to put a Polish grenadier, if only the censors will allow it. Groński delayed giving it to me because I imagine he'd only just got it from Sacchetti,¹⁰⁸ who had died during that time . . .¹⁰⁹ All in all, the gallery has 363, portraits [of female artists?—AW] 145, wives 34, all [the male artists?—AW] more or less 180.¹¹⁰

Translated by Soren Gauger



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¹⁰⁸ We do not know this picture by Warsaw Theaters decorator Antonio Sacchetti, who passed away on April 15, 1870. We do know that Sacchetti came to Warsaw in 1829 and opened a Topographical Office in the ballrooms of the Narodowy Theater, where he presented panoramas and dioramas. The same year he was employed as decorator for Ferdinand Raimund's melodrama *Chłop milionowy* (The Millionth Peasant). Probably the only surviving picture of the Narodowy Theater is the watercolor by Zygmunt Vogel, dated around 1791. Chomiński was unaware of this, but we do see two male figures resembling grenadiers (one is holding an object that we may identify as the rifle with bayonet they often carried).

¹⁰⁹ We omit a brief fragment containing inaccurate information on the Opera House, performances by the Tomasz Truskolaski company in Gdańsk, and entries in Bogusławski's *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego* (The History of the National Theater) of the first tragedy and opera staged in Poland. Cf. Bogusławski, *Dzieje Teatru Narodowego*, 13, 19.

¹¹⁰ In Szwankowski's edition this sentence is found in a note with the parenthetical attribution: "author's note."

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