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Justine Jablonska/MEDILL

Helena Modrzejewska's mannequin at the Polish Museum of America in Chicago.

A century after her death, famed Polish actress is celebrated anew

by JUSTINE JABLONSKA

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2009 marks the centennial of Helena Modrzejewska's death.

A leading 19th century actress in both Poland and the U.S., Modrzejewska starred with such stage greats as Edwin Booth and Maurice Barrymore.

2009 also marks the completion of the first full-length documentary about Modrzejewska, "Modjeska: Woman Triumphant."

The film was shown in Ann Arbor's film festival last weekend and at the Polish Film Festival in Chicago Monday.

"The film is about Modjeska's life and passions," said Barbara Myszynski, the film's director.

Myszynski was in Chicago Monday with her husband, Leonard, the film's cinematographer, to present the film at the Polish Film Festival.

Why Modrzejewska, and why this film?

My husband gave the idea for the film. I started reading about her, and her memoirs are amazing. I was shocked to see there's no documentary about this incredible woman.

It's the immigrant's story, but from the point of view of a woman. Then you get all these layers and levels: Not just the immigrant, but the woman.

A piece of it is about her Polish roots, which I think is the foundation for everything she was and is.

Her personal voice was important to me. Not just the voice of Poland or women, but it's the crossing of cultures.

And she was constantly transforming herself. She's a very contemporary woman.

She always had this melancholy that really affected me a lot.

My husband's a lot like that. That's a Polish quality that just amazes me. Any person that has that – you just want to know more about this person. There is something more, deeper. She always had that – that charisma that was there on stage – and that drew people to her.

What she did for theatre is not my main focus in the film. Of course, I talk about that – how she switched to naturalism and realism, even though books on theatre don't even mention her name.

I took drama as my major in [University of California-Irvine] and there was nothing on Modrzejewska. You barely heard about [Edwin] Booth.

You will find books that say she was an incredible actress, and books that won't have her name.

So the real question is: Who was she? We tried to find out.

What was the filmmaking process like?

It started six years ago so that we would make it in time for the 100th anniversary.

There's a lot of books about her. The more I read, the more we pieced it together, the more we thought, how are we going to condense it?

The material never stopped – stacks and stacks of materials and books. There's something on her in just about every library in the U.S.

I started meeting the family members. Most of them are either artists or engineers.

I met Polish professors and heard about her Polish side. They know so much about her personal background and her whole Polish mentality.

I started realizing that there's discrepancies in her memoirs. Even though I love her voice, and what she's saying, there are things she wrote that aren't true. Like her first lover-seducer. She says she had a first husband. She didn't. She had one – that was Chlapowski, whom she married later. [Her first lover] was already married, so she couldn't legally marry him if she wanted to.

The person who put it all together for me was Duke University professor Beth Holmgren. She wrote a book about Modrzejewska. It's coming out in January.

When we did a two-hour interview with Beth, she tied the whole film together. And that was last November. So that was at the very end of the process.

There's no footage of Modrzejewska, which makes it very hard to make a documentary film from that era. But, since photography was so important to her, there're many images of her, and her face always looks different.

The voice of Modrzejewska [in the film] is Danuta Stenka. Her voice is amazing. She really gave me the personalized voice of Modrzejewska.

The work with the composer was very interesting. He's a young Polish-American. We worked two weeks for 10 hours a day.

We did fundraisers to raise more money. The family stood behind us. I've had enormous support from them – financially, emotionally.

Then we started screenings.

I noticed this film really works well in smaller circles – like artistic salons. Which is exactly what Modrzejewska wanted and did in Warsaw and wanted to do in Orange County.

Why do documentaries matter?

Hopefully they bring us closer to the truth of what happened.

It's always a form of interpretation. But it's an expression of the truth. I'm putting together the pieces how I see them: I get facts, take them, show them.

People do not know what it was like back then. We try and understand our world today by going back.

Did your perspective as a woman of Polish descent influence the film?

I was born here, but I have a "polska dusza" (Polish soul).

Being a woman, being a mother, a wife, being ambitious – that part draws me into her.

I think what I've seen and witnessed makes a big difference.

I was born here. My background is in theater; I love it. I was at the Warsaw Theatre for a year. [Tadeusz] Lomnicki was head of it, and he would let me just watch the actors and look at the perspective of what it's like there.

I did some one-woman shows in Poland, in a foreign language. Then I went to Poland to film school.

The bottom line is you're trying to reach the people. It's not about language. I did a lot of traveling. I went to Italy and I would see things. I don't speak Italian, but is it coming across? Can I understand it? Yes.

And that's what [Modrzejewska] was doing. And she was so superb at it.

What are your favorite moments in the film?

When Modrzejewska says, "For the rest of my life, I would be dependent on no one," – that's an

important moment. We all have to feel like that. The more we're like that, the more successful we can be.

I like the moments with Danuta Stenka. That for me is really strong. Anytime she talks, it's very personal; those are Modrzejewska's words.

What's next for you?

There's a historian in the documentary who wrote a book titled "Broken Glass." He and his wife adopted a child and realized she was schizophrenic. It's not the schizophrenia that interests me most; it's the relationship to his daughter and to his wife. He's an amazing writer, and the book is very cinematic. He's given me the rights to it.

I would really like to do a feature film for the Modrzejewska movie. But it depends on the funding. We'll never start another film without complete funding.

Although, it's an organic process: I would've probably never met Beth [Holmgren] if I had done the film four years ago – so you never know what's going to happen. I wouldn't have had this particular composer. Things fell into place.

I'm reading a lot, but something has to really affect me – like [Modrzejewska's] memoirs.

I have to find hope in the material. Modrzejewska was this legacy – she was an environmentalist, she was a feminist. She always looked to the future.

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Modrzejewska's costumes

Helena Modrzejewska stands at the entrance of the Polish Museum's main hall.

Dressed in an elaborate gray costume with puffed sleeves and a full, heavy skirt that touches the floor, she's been there since I can remember – a silent sentinel guarding over the museum.

On Tuesday, I went to the museum to take photos of the Modrzejewska exhibit. I'd just seen Basia Myszynski's documentary the previous evening and interviewed her about the filmmaking process, the documentary, and Myszynski's thoughts on this extraordinary woman who came to the U.S., learned English and acted alongside such stage greats as Edwin Booth and Maurice Barrymore.

At the museum, Fred Tuytens unlocked the glass door of the exhibit so that I could take photos of Modrzejewska's costumes without the glare of glass. As I was reveling in the fact that I was inches away from something that Modrzejewska had worn, he told me that in six months or so, the costumes would go into storage. "They're too heavy," he said, and are being ruined by being worn, even by a mannequin.

The costumes have been on display at the museum for years. As a little girl, I would stand very close to the glass case and stare up at Modrzejewska's mannequin, with its dramatically dark eyes and pale skin. There was such power there – even though I knew I was looking at a mannequin and not a real person. The fact that Modrzejewska had acted her famous roles in those very costumes fascinated me.

In my childish fantasies, I imagined myself acting alongside Modrzejewska – both of us taking huge

sweeping bows in front of enormous footlights to the sound of thunderous applause. And in a very small way – I followed some of her footsteps, albeit in reverse. After graduating from college, I studied acting at a Polish theatre school. While performing Hamlet's Ophelia in Polish, I remember thinking that this is what it must have been like for Modrzejewska – acting in a language other than the one I speak in every day.

Basia Myszynski, the filmmaker who's just completed a documentary about Modrzejewska, told me that there's no existing film footage of Modrzejewska. It's odd in a sense that no one today knows how she actually acted. All we have are books and notes and theatrical reviews. We've never seen her; we never may. One of Modrzejewska's descendents told Myszynski that she'd once seen footage. Together, they searched for that footage for three years but haven't found it.

My days of acting are far behind me, although they've contributed in many ways to who I am today. But when Tuytens told me that Modrzejewska's costumes will soon no longer be readily available to me, I felt a sense of loss. They've always been there, standing at the entrance of the museum's great hall.

Ralph Modjeski

Helena Modrzejewska's son, Ralph Modjeski, was a prominent bridge builder; his most notable projects include the San Francisco Bay Bridge, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge between Philadelphia, Penn., and Camden, N.J., and the Blue Water Bridge between Port Huron, Mich., and Point Edward, Ont.