

FROM THE EDITOR

The fall issue, SEEP Vol. 28, No. 3, opens with my tribute, IN MEMORIAM, to Józef Szajna (1922–2008), one of the most important and influential of twentieth-century Polish theatre artists. During the late 1960s and early 1970s in Poland, I was able to see many of Szajna's outstanding creations, including *Death on a Pear Tree* and *Akropolis*, and to have the opportunity to meet the artist; then later in New York at the Brooklyn Academy, I attended performances of *Replika* and *Dante*.

The first article in the fall issue is Beate Hein Bennett's vivid portrait of the American-Romanian director and theatre artist, Moshe Yassur, tracing the stages of a career of many displacements and fresh starts that takes the protagonist through different theatrical worlds and languages before a triumphal return to his starting point. Next comes Magdalena Gołaczyńska's article on *Transfer!*, a site-specific performance about the forced migrations of German and Polish populations at the end of World War II when Breslau became Wrocław. A forbidden subject of public discussion during the communist regime, *Transfer!* has now been performed in both Poland and Germany. Maria Ignatieva remembers Stanislavsky's last days on the seventieth anniversary of his death on August 7. April Donahower, as dramaturg for Global Scenes in New Haven, tells us about the three Eastern European plays from Poland, Hungary, and Romania featured at the Global Scenes Festival. Ana Martínez surveys the scenography exhibited at the 2007 Prague Quadrennial, paying particularly attention to complex issues of place and giving special attention to Russia and Eastern Europe. Alexander Morfov, already the subject of a recent article in SEEP, is presented by Robert Blush as the author of *Exiles*, an exemplary work defining the plight of Bulgarians in the post-communist era. The fall issue concludes with Margaret Araneo's review of Nina Polan's virtuoso performance as the Polish-American actress Helena Modjeska, in a salon setting at New York's Kościuszko Foundation.

FROM CRACOW TO ARDEN

NINA POLAN IN *HELENA: THE EMIGRANT QUEEN* AT THE
KOŚCIUSZKO FOUNDATION, NEW YORK, APRIL 10, 2008

Margaret K. Araneo

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an emigrant as “one who removes *from* his [sic] own land to settle (permanently) in another,” while an immigrant is identified as “a person who migrates *into* a country as a settler.”¹ Since each immigrant is by definition also an emigrant (and vice versa), what are the implications of choosing one term over the other when characterizing an individual who has uprooted his or her life *from* one cultural context *to* another? In what direction is the lens to be focused—on what is left behind or on what is approached?

The complexity of the emigrant-immigrant experience was at the core of Nina Polan's portrayal of Helena Modjeska in the one-woman show *Helena: The Emigrant Queen*, by Kazimierz Braun, presented at the Kościuszko Foundation in New York City on April 10, 2008.² Staged on the second floor of the Foundation's elegant town house on East 65 Street, the play takes place in the parlor of the nineteenth-century Polish-American actress Helena Modjeska. Her belongings collected in various boxes, furniture covered with sheets, Modjeska, at the end of her career, prepares to leave her estate (named Arden, after Shakespeare's mother's name and the forest) in Anaheim, California, after declaring bankruptcy. Taking a seat upstage at a small table, she lights one last cigarette and recalls a life, which began in Poland in 1840 and ended in the United States in 1909;³ it was a life marked by fame and obscurity, love and lust, ambition and loss.

Modjeska's narrative spans nearly seventy years and across two continents. Born Helena Opid (later adopting the surname Modrzejewska) in Cracow, Austrian-occupied Poland, she was raised by her mother, who provided her daughter a lower-middle-class life by operating a small café. Helena began her theatrical career as an amateur actress on stage in the provinces. Eventually she would make her way to Russian-ruled Warsaw where she would become a renowned actress and a member of the Polish National Theatre. After birthing two illegitimate children, burying one of them, and suffering the constant scorn and gossip of jealous artists within

the Polish theatre community, she decided at the age of **thirty-six to move** to the United States with her husband and reinvent **herself as an American** actress, eventually touring North America and **Europe with enormous** success.

Kazimierz Braun's play focuses **primarily on the final thirty three** years of Modjeska's life, when she, **according to Braun**, became "an emigré." Braun's decision to **examine Modjeska's life through the lens of** emigration (a decision **reflected in the play's title**) is to draw attention away from Modjeska's process of **assimilation and integration** into U.S. culture and to direct it instead **toward the complex mantle** Helena brought with her when she first arrived in California—a collection of experiences filled with an array of men, artistic challenges, and political struggles that she carried with her as she crisscrossed the continent.

Nina Polan as Modjeska captures the interplay of emigrant past and immigrant present (there and here) that Braun's script explores. Though Polan is always physically alone on stage, her use of gesture and interaction with recorded voiceovers introduces the audience to the influential people (mostly men whom she has loved or who have loved her) in her life. From the start we understand how Modjeska's ambition is connected to her experience managing the domineering men in her life—whether it was her first manager (and father of her children), who we learn raped her before she eventually settled into a complex domestic situation with him, to her one true love who she chose to forgo in pursuit of her career. These men haunt her present and **are** all in one way or another with her as she packs up her things and prepares to leave her home for the last time. Similarly, the complexity of the Polish political context she left behind shadows her life in the United States. She does not hide her political positions and uses her status and freedom in the United States to voice her views on the partition of Poland by Austria, Prussia, and Russia and particularly the oppression that resulted from Russian occupation.

While the undeniable fire and intensity in Modjeska is made more and more apparent through the collection of stories from her past, Polan also allows the audience to see Modjeska's fragility, something which has often gone unexplored. The Modjeska most know is the one captured in the many portraits painted of her throughout her career—a statuesque woman, with vibrant auburn hair, sensually posed. Polan's Modjeska, however, is

much older, her body slower, her voice weaker. She is a woman sometimes grasping to remember details, who seems confused by all she has to do, but who, despite her gradual decline, presses on.

Helena: The Emigrant Queen was presented by The Polish Theatre Institute in the U.S.A., Inc. The organization is committed to producing Polish cultural projects throughout the United States and internationally. Polan who currently serves as the Artistic Director of the Institute has her own emigrant experience. Born in Poland as Janina Katelbach, Polan moved to England as a child. She built a solid theatrical career for herself in the U.K.—graduating from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and performing in the West End as well as in British regional theatres. Eventually, she traveled west to the United States and played in such venues as La MaMa, Seattle Rep, the New Orleans Playhouse, and the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival.

The town house of the Kościuszko Foundation served as a more-than-appropriate space for a piece dedicated to the Polish experience of emigration. The Foundation's mission statement explains the organization's dedication "to promoting and strengthening understanding and friendship between the peoples of Poland and the United States." This idea of exchange between Polish and American cultures is at the center of Modjeska's journey. Through this modest production, which allowed for an intimate engagement with the intricacies of Modjeska's life, the emigrant experience came into full view. The complex transnational journey that so many Poles still embark upon can be seen concentrated in the life of one extraordinary woman—a woman who can be said to have influenced the theatrical history of two nations.

NOTES

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (online).

² The original English title of Braun's play is *Émigré Queen*.

³ 2009 marks the one-hundredth anniversary of Helena Modjeska's death and is being recognized in various events internationally. The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center will host a symposium on Modjeska in spring 2009.