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inside:

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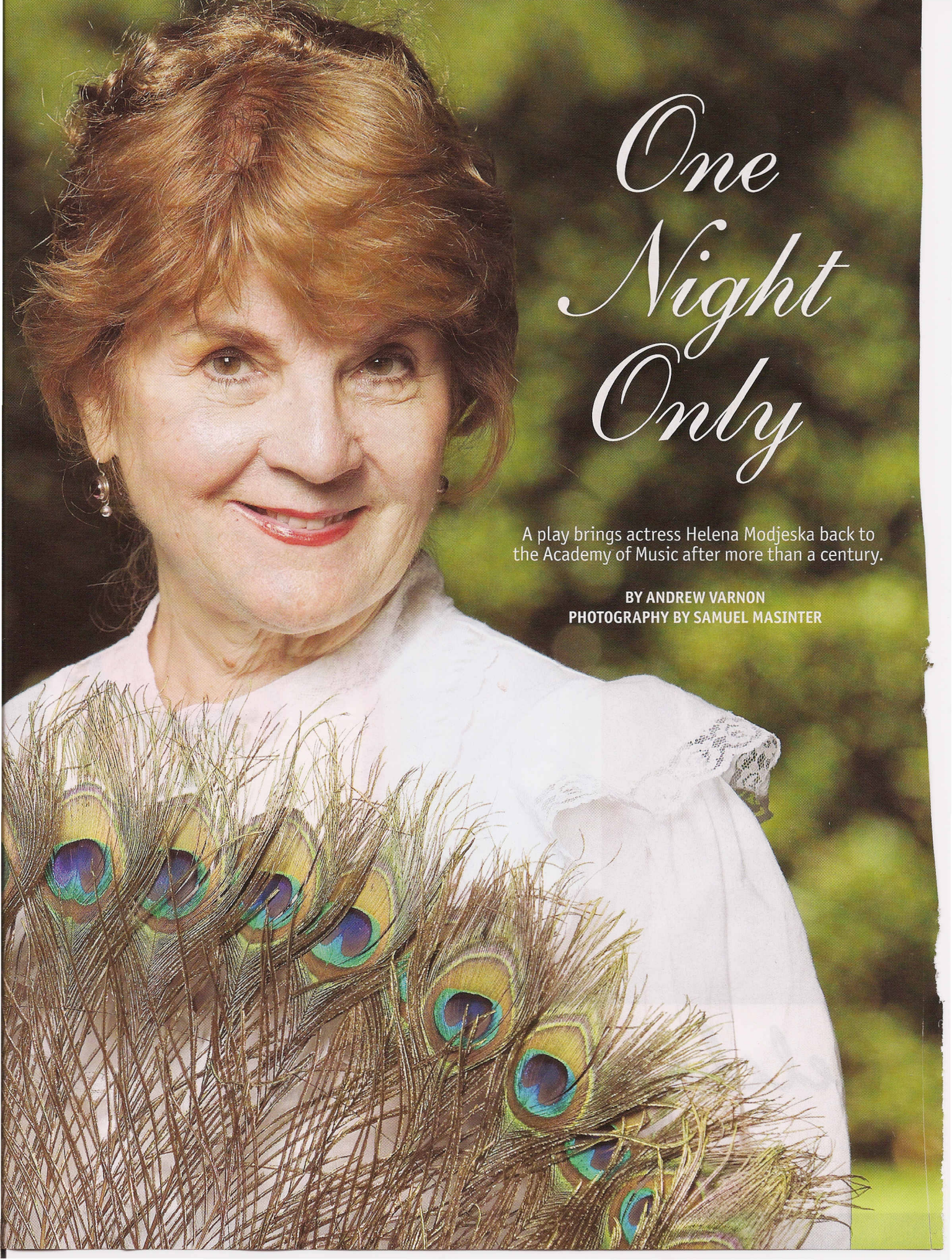
Homes arise from a deconstructed mill

Dinner at Elmer's

Eating out at the general store

Untamed in Hartford

Mark Twain's house today



One Night Only

A play brings actress Helena Modjeska back to the Academy of Music after more than a century.

BY ANDREW VARNON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAMUEL MASINTER

When the actress Helena Modjeska first performed at the Academy of Music in Northampton, the now-venerable theater was only three years old. The year was 1894 and the Polish-born actress's fame was so widespread that she was billed simply as "Modjeska." Her name ran in big letters over that of her co-star, Otis Skinner, and the play, in smaller type: *As You Like It*. The reviewer in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* called her "one of the three or four great actors of the age" and said of her performance, "this is the acme of art." She was fifty years old, and the reviewer marveled at how she "frisk[ed] and [sprang] about the boards with little less nimbleness than that youth that she imitates."

Modjeska performed twice more at the Academy in Northampton, in 1899 and 1900. She gave almost six thousand performances in thirty years of acting across the United States, from California to New England, performing thirty-five plays—many of them Shakespeare plays. She was praised for her natural acting style. Her 1894 performance in Northampton was given on a Monday evening, and the next five days saw her perform, in succession, in Springfield, Troy, Utica, Syracuse and Rochester. She had a candy named after her. It was Southern cream caramel over marshmallow, inspired by a performance she gave at Macauley Theater in Louisville, Kentucky.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Modjeska's death. But on September 20, actress Ann Maggs, with sponsorship from the Northampton Arts Council and the local chapter of the Kosciuszko Foundation, will portray Modjeska at the Academy in a play written by Maggs herself, called *Modjeska's Voice: The Actress Returns to the Academy of Music*. Performing with Maggs will be her husband, the WFCR classical music host Walter Carroll.

Stepping into the shoes of historical personages is nothing new for Maggs, who has created and performed bio-plays about the doyenne of Wistariahurst, Belle Skinner, and Emily Dickinson's first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd.

Maggs said she admired the way Modjeska portrayed the characters she played—often strong-minded and sometimes fallen women. In Modjeska's mind, they all had honor. Maggs quoted Modjeska as saying, "The human spirit needs forgiveness and redemption."

Modjeska was known for her natural acting style. While many actors of her day adopted a melodramatic style with exaggerated gestures, Modjeska wanted people to "believe what she's saying and not think that she's acting," Maggs said. "She wanted them to think, 'This is really happening.'"

"I really recognized a kindred spirit in that feeling," Maggs said, "trying to be somebody and be believable."

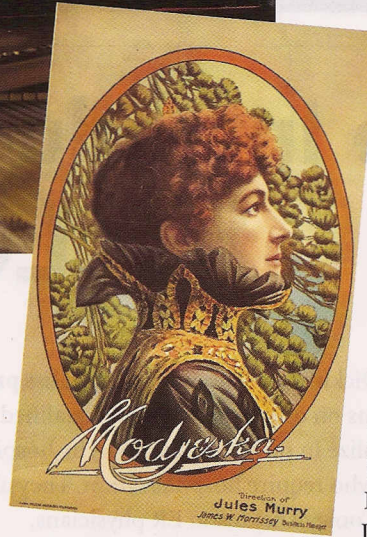
Maggs' play will roughly follow Modjeska's long and interesting life. Modjeska was considered one of the finest actors of her generation, acting alongside such greats as Skinner, Maurice Barrymore and Edwin Booth (John Wilkes Booth's older brother). She traveled the country playing one-night stands and living in a train car. Though she didn't have a university education, she corresponded with writers and intellectuals such as Oscar Wilde, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and

Charles Dickens. She was also known as a Polish patriot, speaking out for the independence of her native land, though she lived much of her life abroad.

Modjeska was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1840, at a time when the country was broken up and occupied by foreign powers: Russia, Austria and Prussia. Polish culture was often suppressed,

Maggs said, and in the Russian part of Poland, you could get sent to Siberia for singing a Polish hymn.

She was introduced to theater by the family tutor, Gustav Sinnmayer, whom she married and accompanied to Warsaw to perform at the Imperial Theater, the most important theater in Poland at the time. Sinnmayer used the stage name Modrzejewski and when Modjeska began acting in Warsaw, she used the feminine version of that name, later anglicized to "Modjeska." She ended up leaving Sinnmayer and later married Karol Bozenta Chlapowski. She and Chlapowski (who later, in America, would go by "Count Bozenta" although he





Modjeska came to America to escape censorship and harassment in occupied Poland.

was not a member of the titled aristocracy) held salons in their home that were frequented by poets, actors and politicians. In Warsaw, she met an American actor named Maurice Neville. Neville told Modjeska that she should learn English and go to America.

Modjeska struggled with the Russian censors while performing in Warsaw. She was performing as Ophelia in *Hamlet* and the Russian censors didn't like the idea of a play about killing a king. The Russian authorities also sent detectives to her salons to spy on the attendees, suspecting that they were plotting against the state.

So it was for personal and political reasons that Modjeska and Bozenta formed a Utopian community in California in 1876 with a group of Polish intellectuals and freethinkers. The community was unsuccessful and many of the other Poles went back to Europe, but Modjeska went to San Francisco instead, learned English and began her acting career in the U.S. At first she did one-night engagements throughout the mining towns of the West, but she ended up traveling across the country. An excerpt from Maggs' script gives the flavor of those adventures as reflected in Modjeska's lively journal:

"Stage-struck girls think that the life of an actress is romantic. During my season with Edwin Booth, I wrote in my diary, 'Milwaukee: we played *Hamlet* last night, and the audience was cold and unsympathetic.' Those same girls think that the stage is strewn with roses. The next night in Cedar Rapids, I wrote, 'There is a tannery behind the theatre and we burned incense, paper and cotton to drown that terrible odor. I sprinkled the stage with eau de cologne and still

almost fainted from the tannery smell during the play.' In Bloomington, I wrote, 'My dressing room is painted bright vermilion red and makes my eyes water.' So much for the romance of the stage!"

Modjeska was invited to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 to represent Poland in a conference about women in modern life. Maggs said Modjeska gave a speech about how the occupying countries "have tried to kill the Polish spirit." "As long as there is one Polish woman alive, Poland will not die," Modjeska is reported to have said.

Word of the speech reached Poland and Russia, and when Modjeska was traveling to perform in Warsaw, she was turned away, given twenty-four hours to leave the country and banished from Poland for life. She continued acting in the United States, performing Shakespeare and other high theater despite the turn toward vaudeville in the early 20th century. She died in California in 1909.

Modjeska's Voice

By Ann Maggs

Sunday, Sept. 20, 3 p.m.

Academy of Music, Northampton

Tickets available at the Northampton Box Office

Information: www.modjeskasvoice.com

Modjeska's stately bearing belied the hardships of an actress' life in Western mining towns.

