

Helena Modrzejewska to Maria Faleńska

San Francisco, May 15, 1877

Dear Madame,

Several days ago, I picked up your letter, which pleased me to no end.

Thank you, thank you, thank you! [. . .]

I hasten to share with you a good turn of events for me. To wit, I had an audition in English for *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, in the presence of the local theater manager and director.¹ I practically had to beg for this audition, as these bears² did not believe that art could exist in a country which, in their opinion, has been erased from the map of world history, a country of which nothing hereabouts is ever heard. In fact, I triumphed as I never had before. I transformed the bears into a couple of poodles, jumping on two paws before me. The director – thrilled, amazed, charmed – engaged me for as many appearances as I myself would want, and he wishes³ that in a month I might agree to take the [stage] floor. I'm actually putting it off because I want to learn a couple more roles – but it's very likely they'll persuade me to make an earlier appearance. My English doesn't bother them at all – on the contrary, the Yankees say that some of the sounds in my speech are "PERFECTLY WONDERFULL [sic],"⁴ and not only does my accent not offend them, but, rather, they like it. [. . .] Writing about myself



and only about myself, I've forgotten to inform you that Karol is presently in Anaheim. He went there for the climate, but partly also to save money, as our funds are practically exhausted – the farm having consumed everything. After all,⁵ here in San Francisco the air is quite unhealthy for those who don't sufficiently protect themselves – and you know Karol. He ran around evenings in a thin frock coat and caught a cold. But he wrote me yesterday that he's almost completely recovered – and that he'll be attending my performances. I must describe to

¹ Both of the words in the original – *dyrektora* and *reżysera* – are translated as “director”; refers to John McCullough, proprietor of the California Theatre in San Francisco.

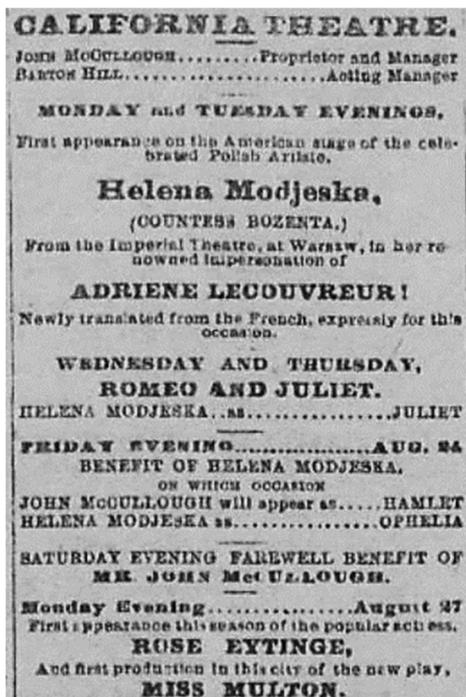
² The literal meaning of *niedźwiedzi* is “bears.”

³ Difficult to translate – *życzy sobie* – is more like “wish,” perhaps a bit archaic in this context. There is no precise equivalent in English. In this context, “he hopes” is likely just what we'd say in English today.

⁴ The small caps are English words in Modrzejewska's Polish letter.

⁵ *Zresztą* is an adverb without any clear equivalent in English. “After all” seems to fit the context.

you how I'm living here. Imagine a little two-story house⁶ – made of wood – but resembling a small palace with Venetian windows gracing the front, the interior completely hung with



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tapestries, from the hallway clear to the kitchen, where the housekeeper,⁷ in a rocking chair, reading a newspaper, watches over her cooking pots, while in front of the house are bushes and flowers, and in the yard fuchsia, grapevines and roses. Such is the place where I reside. I live with Dolek⁸ on the upper floor;⁹ in front of me there lives a skinny, black lady, my acquaintance, and farther down – the fat, enormous housekeeper. Those two ladies like me so much that they won't let me breathe – every little while one of them looks in on me, to see if there isn't something I need, whether I'm feeling poorly; in a word they spoil me. Besides this, I have a teacher [Joe Tucholsky]¹⁰ – a young person who's officially¹¹ in love¹² with me. I'm grateful to her for the refinement¹³ of my language, as she comes daily and spends four to five hours here, sometimes staying for the entire evening. She demonstrates that I was meant to be liked¹⁴ by the fair sex. For this, no Yankee has till now ever held me in regard; none has ever paid me that compliment [. . .]. What a

nonsensical letter I'm writing to you! It's due to the joy I feel from having succeeded at my audition. Actually, coming back from the theater, I was so happy, like a child, that I ran into the yard to tear off flowers – and I almost netted a lovely hummingbird that was bustling about the fuchsia, so I could flatten him out to fit into an envelope and send to you [Pani Maria],¹⁵ but

⁶ Literally “one floor.” But that's European style, meaning there's a *parter* – ground floor – and then one *piętro*, one floor, above it. Likely Modjeska lives in a Victorian flat (one residence per floor), or a Victorian apartment (multiple residences per floor).

⁷ *Pani domu* sounds like “lady of the house,” but here – since the woman is tending the pots in the kitchen – this term means “housekeeper.”

⁸ Dolek, or Dolcio, is Helena's affectionate nickname for her son, Ralph.

⁹ Americans would call this the “second story.”

¹⁰ Josephine Tucholsky.

¹¹ This is slightly whimsical. *Formalnie* could be “formally.”

¹² This is an Innocent, 19th century expression. There is no hint of the sexuality that contemporary readers would impute.

¹³ Literally – as you “break” bread, or *opłatek*, at Christmas time.

¹⁴ This is also straightforward, simply the literal translation.

¹⁵ This is what she writes – literally, and formally, *pannie Marii*. But in modern English, there's no word that fits here other than “you.” (Even “Dear Madame,” in the greeting, is a bit awkward. But there was no alternative in that context.)

something in the joy made my heart grow soft; I felt sorry for the little creature and let him live. A pity though, because you¹⁶ could have worn him in a brooch. I must close now, for my letter isn't making any sense.

SOURCE:

Online (in Polish): <http://plaszcz-zabojcy.blogspot.com/2014/05/odcinek-1049-helena-modrzejewska-1877.html>. From: *Korespondencja Heleny Modrzejewskiej i Karola Chłapowskiego*, Vol. 1. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965, pp. 385–387.

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¹⁶ This is the impersonal “you” in English. The Polish *można* has this impersonal sense – there is no subject, “you” – though the imagined brooch is clearly intended for use by the letter’s recipient.