

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Adah Isaacs Menken, Actress, 1835?–1868

Adah Menken dazzled stage audiences across two continents with her daring and beauty. Enhancing her mystique were conflicting tales about her background—rumors of Creole parentage, circus horsemanship, a young romance in Cuba, Indian captivity, and rescue by Texas Rangers.¹

Most likely she was raised as Ada Bertha Theodore in New Orleans. Certainly she was living in Texas by 1855, when a Liberty newspaper published poems and essays and announced Shakespeare readings by her.² In 1856 Adah married Alexander Menken, a traveling musician, in Livingston, Texas. She moved with him to Cincinnati, where she plunged into Jewish issues. Adah claimed to be Jewish by birth. She wrote for *The Israelite*, fervently advocating for Jewish communities worldwide.³



Lured by the stage, Adah played roles in Louisiana and New York. When she and Menken divorced, she retained his name through three subsequent marriages. Adah's career break came in 1860, when she was cast in *Mazeppa*, a dramatization of Lord Byron's poem. In the grand finale, she rode bareback across the stage apparently nude (actually wearing a body stocking).

It was a sensation. Adah performed to packed houses in New York City, Virginia City, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, London, and Paris. But she craved esteem as an intellectual and writer. Most of Adah's poetry seems flamboyant today, yet she counted among her friends such notables as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Charles Dickens, George Sand, and Alexandre Dumas.⁴

Adah fell ill after a performance in Paris and died at the age of 33. From her deathbed she wrote, "I am lost to art and life. Yet when all is said and done, have I not at my age tasted more of life than most women who live to be a hundred?"⁵

Quotations

The unshrined ghosts of wasted hours and of lost loves are always tugging at my heart. . . . The body and the soul don't fit each other.—Adah Isaacs Menken⁶

She was a vision of celestial harmony made manifest in the flesh—a living and breathing poem that set the heart to music. . . . I saw her as a boy.—Charles Warren Stoddard⁷

Photo

ITC 68-2503. Caption: "Adah Isaacs Menken in costume, 1866." Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Wallace, "How the West Was Won, Part IV: The Frontier's Fabulous Women," *Life Magazine* May 11, 1959, pp. 66-86 (excerpts), online http://www.walnet.org/csis/news/usa_59/life-590511.html (June 2, 2005); Jack Maguire, "Stage Sight: Adah Menken of Nacogdoches became America's first sex symbol," *Southwest Airlines Magazine* 9:11, June 1980, p. 22; Peter Dollard, "Passing for Jewish: the life and writings of Adah Isaacs Menken," *Judaism*, Winter-Spring 2004, online, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is1-2_53/ai_n8964755 (April 13, 2005).

² "Adah Isaacs Menken," Oldpoetry Archive, Underground Poetry Society, <http://oldpoetry.com/authors/Menken> (April 13, 2005); Pamela Lynn Palmer, "Adah Isaacs Menken: From Texas to Paris," in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), p. 89.

³ "Adah Isaacs Menken," Jewish Virtual Library, American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/AMenken.html> (April 13, 2005); Leo Shpall, "Adah Isaacs Menken," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 1943, pp. 162-66.

⁴ Pamela Lynn Palmer, "Adah Isaacs Menken: From Texas to Paris," in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), p. 91; "Menken, Adah Isaacs," *Encyclopedia Britannica* from Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9052026> (July 14, 2005).

⁵ Clayton Rand, "Adah Isaacs Menken," *Stars in Their Eyes* (Gulfport, Miss.: Dixie Press, 1953), p. 157.

⁶ Charles William Stoddard, "La Belle Menken," *National Magazine*, February 1905, online, http://www.cadytech.com/dumas/related/la_belle_menken_by_stoddard.php (June 2, 2005); Samuel Dickson, "Adah Isaacs Menken," Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, <http://www.sfmuseum.org/bio/adah.html> (April 13, 2005).

⁷ Charles William Stoddard, "La Belle Menken," *National Magazine*, February 1905, online, http://www.cadytech.com/dumas/related/la_belle_menken_by_stoddard.php (June 2, 2005).