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


