

## She Had a Gimmick

Ivan Stepanovych Mazeppa was born circa 1639 in that part of the Ukraine that was then ruled by Poland. Favored at court by the Polish king Jan Kazimierz II, the young page was unluckily caught in an affair with the wife of a high official named Falbowski. The angry husband had Mazeppa stripped naked and tied backwards upon a horse, which he then whipped into a frenzy and released to gallop off wildly through the rough undergrowth. Mazeppa survived, left Poland for the Ukraine to begin a military career, and (while many of his exploits were over-glamorized) he was to capture the imagination of the Romantic generation in Western Europe. Paintings by Géricault, Delacroix and Vernet, along with a poem by Lord Byron, did the trick.



*Mazeppa and the Wolves (1826),  
oil on canvas by Horace Vernet (1789–1863)*

Centuries later, a girl named Rose Louise Hovick wrote a book about her early years in the theater. From a successful vaudeville act billed as "Baby June and Her Farmboys" to her solo striptease performance as "Gypsy Rose Lee", the book was made into a Broadway play (and movie) entitled "Gypsy". Rose Louise launched a hugely successful career in burlesque, and (with intelligence and humor) became the inspiration for many acts to follow. Bourbon Street in the French Quarter saw many, and New Orleans in recent years has delighted to the movements of the "Shim Shamettes" and "Bustout Burlesque".

Mazeppa is the name of one of the strippers in "Gypsy" who tells Louise, "Kid you gotta have a gimmick if you wanna get ahead":

"You can uh ... You can uh ...  
You can uh ... uh ... uh ...  
That's how burlesque was born.  
So I uh ... and I uh ...  
And I uh ... uh ... uh ...  
But I do it with a horn ...

Once I was a Schleppe,  
Now I'm Miss Mazeppa,  
With my revolution in dance.  
You gotta have a gimmick  
If you wanna have a chance!

How Mazeppa went from being a romantic Ukrainian to a burlesque striptease artist is a long and unusual tale, and such a transformation could only come about by way of New Orleans.

Although she claimed many ancestral stories to the contrary, Adah Isaacs Menken was born in 1835 to Magdeleine and Auguste Théodore in the living quarters of the family's small general store in that section of the Crescent City known as Milneburg. Christened Ada Bertha at St. Paul's parish church, her mother was a French Creole and her father an *octaroon libre*. The Pontchartrain Railroad had introduced horse-drawn train service to that lakefront suburb four years before, and on September 17, 1832, the steam-driven "Smoky Mary" line began a century of service.

Ada's father died when she was only six months old, and the Widow Théodore sold the store in 1836 and married Campbell Josephs. He was an instructor of Greek and Latin at the St. Charles Academy for

Young Gentlemen. Her stepfather taught her privately, and by 1852 (the year he died) Ada's assets were her love of art, poetry and knowledge of foreign languages. She took up the occupation of tutoring young ladies, but yellow fever visited New Orleans with a fury. Schools were closed for an indefinite period, and Ada was forced out of work.



*Adah Isaacs Menken (June 15, 1835 – August 10, 1868)*



Hard times were upon her until an Austrian nobleman named Baron Friedrich von Eberstadt came to New Orleans. Smitten by the attractive young tutor, he sent his wife and daughter off to New York and took Ada with him to Havana as his mistress. There she claimed to have danced at the *Tacon Teatro*, where all Havana idolized her as "Queen of the Plaza". The truth was much more sordid. Making her way back to the States after the Baron left her, Ada became an actress and master of self-promotion. Violating conventional norms, she was perhaps the first American woman to crop her hair close to her head. She even smoked cigarettes in public.



*Menken appearing in Mazeppa, 1866*

Even more unconventional, she married four men in the space of a decade. Marriage to the man who was considered her first husband, Alexander Isaac Menken, a Jew whose religion she embraced, came in 1856. She was actually married for the first time in February 1855, to a musician named G. W. Kneass. Ada added an "h" to her first name and an "s" to Isaac, and by 1858 began billing herself as Adah Isaacs Menken. She appeared on the stage at Shreveport in "The Lady of Lyons" in 1857 and debuted in New Orleans the same year in "Fazio" at the Varieties Theater. Keeping her stage name from Menken, she wed prizefighter John Carmel Heenan two years later (without yet legally being divorced from Menken). Robert Henry Newell, humorist with the "*Herald*" and husband after Heenan,

declared, "Adah was a symbol of Desire Awakened to every man who set eyes on her." Editor Ed James of the "*New York Clipper*" reported observations that she "was a reincarnation of Cleopatra" and reminiscent of "a tiger stalking its prey". Husband four (or five depending on how you're counting) was Captain James Barkley. Adah almost married Blondin who crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope, but he wouldn't let her out there with him. They did a vaudeville tour together instead.

Adah considered her major starring role to have been her performance in "*Les Pirates de la Savane*" (attended by Napoleon III, the Duke of Edinburgh and the King of Greece); but her great fame came from playing the role of Mazeppa on stage, beginning in 1861. Lord Byron wrote an epic poem in 1819 based on the true story of Mazeppa from Voltaire's "History of Charles XII, King of Sweden". Byron despised his penmanship and enlisted Mary Shelley, author of "Frankenstein" and wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, to copy his manuscript for publication when the Shelleys visited Byron in Venice the year before.

Other poems entitled "Mazeppa" followed Byron's with one by Victor Hugo in 1829 and Juliusz Slowacki in 1840. A play was written based on these poems, and even John Howard Payne (of "Home, Sweet Home" fame) wrote an English version. Payne was infatuated with Mary Shelley, but in her he only had a literary interest. Payne also corresponded with Colonel Maunsel White of New Orleans, who (according to an 1850 article in the "*New Orleans Daily Delta*") "introduced the celebrated tobasco red pepper" and its "sauce or pepper decoction".

The play "Mazeppa, or the Wild Horse of Tartary", had Adah as the noble Tartar lad physically strapped to a real horse for the thrilling climax. She wore a flesh colored body stocking, but rumors ran rampant that she would appear nude. In those days, it was as good as the real thing and New York audiences were scandalized, shocked *and* delighted! Then it was off to San Francisco in 1863 where she wowed Bret Harte and actor Junius Booth, among others. Edwin Booth was also impressed. The next year "Mazeppa" was in Paris and London. During her tour, Adah purportedly had affairs with Alexandre Dumas *père*, and with English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Friends included Mark Twain, George Sand, Jenny Lind and most of European nobility and royalty of the time. She dedicated a book of verse to Charles Dickens who was enthralled by her but said, "She is a sensitive poet who, unfortunately, cannot write."

Adah's last performance was on May 30, 1868. She died at the very young age of 33 on August 10, 1868, apparently from a combination of tuberculosis and peritonitis, and was buried in Paris.



*Adah in the arms of Alexandre Dumas père*

With so many daring performances and so many famous people in her life, in 1862 she reflected on her public and private personae:



"I have always believed myself to be possessed of two souls, one that lives on the surface of life, pleasing and pleased; the other as deep and as unfathomable as the ocean; a mystery to me and all who know me."

She was buried in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris. The inscription on her tomb read "Born in Louisiana" and the words:

"Thou knowest."



*Engraving of Adah Isaacs Menken's tomb in Paris*

So what might all this have meant to history? On April 14, 1865, another actress named Kay Vance was appearing at the National Theater in Washington, D. C. She and her trained horse, Don Juan,

headed the cast of "Mazeppa, or the Wild Horse of Tartary". President Lincoln had planned to take his son Tad to the performance. Tad went to see "Mazeppa" that evening, but the President changed his mind and went instead to Ford's Theater and his fatal destiny with the third Booth brother. If only Adah had been on stage that night!



*The old "Smoky Mary" at the Milneburg Station, 1860s*



*Old Milneburg map: From here Adah's fame spread across the globe.*





*Adah Isaacs Menken, photograph by A. Liebert, Paris*

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"She Had a Gimmick"  
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