



The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America

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The Shakespeare Riots recounts the story of this momentous night, its two larger-than-life protagonists, and the myriad political and cultural currents that fueled the violence. In an engrossing narrative that moves at a breakneck pace from the American frontier to the Mississippi River, to the posh theaters of London, to the hangouts of the most notorious street gangs of the day, Nigel Cliff weaves a spellbinding saga of soaring passions, huge egos, and venal corruption.

Cliff charts the course of this tragedy from its beginnings as a somewhat comical contretemps between Englishman William Charles Macready, the haughty lion of the London stage, and Edwin Forrest, the first great American star and a popular hero to millions. Equally celebrated, and equally self-centered, the two were once friends, then adversaries. Exploiting this rivalry, “nativist” agitators organized mobs of bullyboys to flex their muscle by striking a blow against the foppish Macready and the Old World’s cultural hegemony that he represented.

The moment Macready took the stage in New York, his adversaries sprang into action, first by throwing insults, then rotten eggs, then chairs. When he dared show his face again, an estimated twenty thousand packed the streets around the theater. As cobblestones from outside rained down on the audience, National Guard troops were called in to quell the riot. Finding themselves outmatched, the Guardsmen discharged their weapons at the crowd, with horrific results. When the smoke cleared, as many as thirty people lay dead, with scores more wounded.

The Shakespeare Riots is social and cultural history of the highest order. In this wondrous saga Nigel Cliff immerses readers in the bustle of mid-nineteenth-century New York, re-creating the celebrity demimonde of the day and capturing all the high drama of a violent night that robbed a nation of its innocence.

The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America Details

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Karla says

America in the 1830s and 1840s had some pretty crazy and colorful shit going down.

The riot doesn't occur until the penultimate chapter, and all the preceding chapters establishes so much context and lays out so much history simply to have the Astor Place Riot make a lick of sense.

Because one actor's fanboys crashing a theatre while the rival is performing? And the state militia firing on them and killing a score or more? It sounds so ridiculous.

But Nigel Cliff plots out the various political, social, cultural and literary threads - and the complex egos and mad personalities (Ned Buntline!!) - that propelled a former friendship and professional rivalry into the flashpoint of riot and death.

Definitely recommended for theater history fans and buffs of the weird and wacky underbelly of American history.

Anne says

Ostensibly about the 1849 riots in New York between fans of two star actors, one American and one British, the book is actually much broader in scope. In addition to theater-related matters such as the nature of the theater at that time in both countries and the popularity of Shakespeare with the masses (especially in America, and particularly in the pioneer west), the author goes into great detail about social conditions in both countries, politics, and anti-American travel literature by British writers.

Cliff has a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the U.S. than most British writers (I'm talking about today, but this applies to the 1840s, too!) and can see his own country in perspective as well. He points out that during this period the English were in the process of turning from one of the rowdiest, rudest, least mannered people in Europe to one of the primmest. Appreciation of Shakespeare was actually much greater in America, where rough-and-tumble men of the frontier felt that the Bard expressed their deepest feelings. They could recite long passages from the plays and even correct actors when they slipped up.

Still, the book feels padded. I don't know whether Cliff realized only after he began writing that the riots and the rivalry between Edwin Forrest and William Macready that gave birth to them wouldn't fill a book, or whether he started out with a sweeping vision, but much of the book has little to do with the incident of the title. Some of it is interesting, but I felt impatient to get back to the main story.

Footnote: in the final chapter, when he talks about the later lives of the two principals and the aftermath of their rivalry, he fails to mention what may be Forrest's most enduring legacy: a baby born in 1834 was named for him--Edwin Booth, the greatest actor of the 19th century.

Janet Forest says

It's fascinating history, but I had a hard time staying engaged in the writing.

But it was worth the work to understand the powerful impact that these two actors and the riots had on American society.

QueenMelindroth says

Great read for those of us who are artistically inclined, lovers of Shakespeare or simply history buffs. Well written, easy to read. Never dry and certainly not boring. Coming from a musical background with expansive knowledge of music history it was interesting to see how theater and opera were viewed so differently, and to compare how the arts are treated to today in particular in American society. Seeing the roots so to speak of not only art appreciation, but also of social norms in American culture as viewed this the circumstances leading up to these events.

Highly recommend, if only for the engaging way to learn interesting tidbits about US history. Quite a few facts thrown in to this book my IB/AP history textbooks conveniently left out.

Cindy says

Interesting tale of an episode in history I was completely unaware. Reminded me how those of us who live mostly in our heads get very worried when large groups of people give over to pathos (emotion) only.

Emily says

Mr. Cliff's book, ostensibly about two rival actors in the 1840s, one American and one English, is actually much broader in scope. Starting with the bloody, seminal Astor Place riot of May 10, 1849, he elucidates the state of relations between the two countries, the role theatre in general and Shakespeare in particular played in the contemporary culture, growing class distinctions in America, the westward expansion due to Manifest Destiny, and changing attitudes toward acting as a profession and government control of the London theatre scene, among other things. I appreciated the glimpses into a time period with which I was fairly unfamiliar as well as the short excursions into the history of Shakespeare's plays being performed, Dickens' trip through America and the Five Points gangs of New York.

William Macready and Edwin Forrest were in the right place at the right time (or, considering the loss of life during the riot, the wrong place at the wrong time) to become symbols of diametrically opposed value systems held by diverging groups. The two larger-than-life characters started as mutually admiring friends drawn together by their similar experiences and isolated status, but jealousy eventually took over and destroyed the friendship, allowing their personal falling-out to become the focal point for festering national and local resentments. A tragic story all around, the Astor Place riot was a turning point in American history. Class relations, who attended the theatre and what was considered acceptable behavior by an audience, and the use of police vs. military for riot control were all affected.

Really an interesting time period, but occasionally I found my mind drifting away from the words on the page. Mr. Cliff's style leans heavily towards longer, more convoluted sentences with lots of dependent phrases and big words (I have a more-than-decent vocabulary, and still had to look a few words up) which made it hard to read at times. But still well worth picking up for a close look at this facet of American and British history.

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Text Addict says

Published in 2007, yet remarkably timely. The key word that's not in the subtitle is "nativism."

Austin Collins says

Nigel Cliff's *The Shakespeare Riots* hearkens back with delight to an era when dinner parties lasted for hours and included toasts and speeches, when every poor frontiersman had a copy of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* in his log cabin, when traveling drama troupes performed for audiences of loggers and fur trappers and silver prospectors who knew every line as well (or better) than the actors. Being a thespian in those days was only barely a notch above being a gambler or a prostitute, and the occupation was populated with the desperate and the destitute.

Shakespeare was considered the voice of the common man in young America. People in the United States saw in his plays the brave struggle of the underdog against authority. The heroes were strong, honest and brave in the face of a hostile and pretentious world. It resonated perfectly in this brash upstart country.

The relationship between the United States and Great Britain has always been complex and conflicted. Never was this more obvious than in the theaters of the 1840s, where a strangely passionate battle was taking place: a cultural war over who really owned the Bard, and what his work really meant. This peculiar clash finally boiled down to two men: Yankee Edwin Forrest (1806-1872) and Englishman William Macready (1793-1873), whose friendship devolved into a deeply personal rivalry and eventually exploded into a proxy campaign between the working class and the wealthy, the Americans and the British, the common man and the privileged, in the bloody Astor Place Riot that occurred on May 10, 1849 at the Astor Opera House in Manhattan, which no longer exists. This entire book leads up to that moment.

After the riot, two great shifts occurred: first, Shakespeare was plucked away from the common man and appropriated by High Culture; it became something that inhabited the realm of English lit classrooms, endlessly analyzed and dissected by teachers. In short, it became boring. It became dull. It became something people had to seek, to discover on their own. It was no longer part of everyone's shared experience. Second, a great pivot in governmental philosophy took place, swinging away from freedom of expression and towards the protection of property. For a long time, periodic street riots were considered a normal part of the "letting-off-steam" social dynamic. After 1849, however, police trained in military-style tactics and equipped with military-style weapons became common in America, ready and able to quell civil unrest.

The Shakespeare Riots is a wonderful exploration of America's strange and dissonant relationship with Shakespeare in particular and the theater in general. It is also a marvelous overview of Nineteenth-Century

American culture from an outside perspective.

The book can be neatly summarized by this passage from chapter 12, page 248, which ascribes blame for the violence:

It was the fault of Macready's father, for educating his son as a gentleman and going bankrupt. It was the fault of the English writers, for stomping over American self-esteem. It was the fault of several American states, for causing Americans to be reviled as debt-dodgers.* It was the fault of journalists, for whipping up partisanship to sell papers. It was the fault of the British government, for its disastrous Irish policy.** It was the fault of Jacksonian politics, for pandering to gang leaders. It was the fault of the Upper Ten***, for building an opera house in a provocative location. It was the fault of the new mayor, unversed in crowd control. It was the fault of the irresistible flows of capital and population that had carved out a resentful and often violent underclass. And yes, it was the fault of Forrest, for bullying his way to self-vindication, and of Macready, for defending his respectability to the bitter end.

*America was a debtor nation in the 1840s, and some state legislatures had suggested that rather than raise taxes to meet our obligations, we simply ignore them and default. This, as you can imagine, made the U.S. extremely unpopular abroad.

**Which led to mass immigration to the U.S., many of which (as everyone knows) remained in New York.

***I.e., New York City's "Upper Ten Thousand," what we could call today "The 1%."

Oxford-educated, Nigel Cliff is a former film and drama critic who really knows his stuff. I highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in American history and/or the history of theater.

I do have two quibbles, and I sincerely hope that Mr. Cliff will forgive me. The first is the writing style, which can, at times, frankly, be a bit sludgy. *The Shakespeare Riots* sometimes reads like a Master's thesis or Doctoral dissertation. The material is fascinating, but the reader must sometimes plow through sentences such as this (from chapter 6, page 120, in which Cliff explains how American authors had trouble getting anything published because they lacked credibility):

Instead, they read English taunts that they had no talent for literature, art, or philosophy, that sitting around drinking mint juleps and chewing tobacco, talking up the glories of independence, and swearing that they were very graceful and agreeable people would not make them scholars any more than gentlemen, and nothing stung more.

My only other complaint (again, a minor one) is that Cliff often (and sometimes slightly) changes the subject in mid-thought and occasionally rambles from the story of one person or event to the story of another person or event and then back again without clear transitions.

In chapter 9, on pages 178-179, for instance, Cliff discusses the life of Catherine "Kate" Forrest, Edwin's wife:

Kate was what was then pejoratively known as a bluestocking or an advanced woman. She was highly intelligent, a progressive thinker, and, in private, a subtle and powerful advocate for women's rights; the sepulchral ideal of middle-class American wifehood must have struck her cold. Fanny Trollope captured the routine with scalpel precision. Trollope's exemplary woman is college educated, marries early, and immediately vanishes into domestic insignificance...

The paragraph then continues at length, but do you see what happened in the third sentence? Cliff changed the subject from Kate Forrest to Fanny Trollope (English novelist 1779–1863). Not that it isn't relevant, but the transition is extremely sudden and unannounced, and unless you are paying very close attention it can be distracting or disorienting.

Aside from those two extremely small complaints, I found *The Shakespeare Riots* both entertaining and informative. I recommend it to anyone with an interest in drama or history, and highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in both.

Erik Moloney says

One of the bloodiest incidents in New York's history, the so-called Astor Place Riot of May 10, 1849, was ignited by a long-simmering grudge match between the two leading Shakespearean actors of the age. Despite its unlikely origins, though, there was nothing remotely quaint about this pivotal moment in history—the unprecedented shooting by American soldiers of dozens of their fellow citizens, leading directly to the arming of American police forces.

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Cliff charts the course of this tragedy from its beginnings as a somewhat comical contretemps between Englishman William Charles Macready, the haughty lion of the London stage, and Edwin Forrest, the first great American star and a popular hero to millions. Equally celebrated, and equally self-centered, the two were once friends, then adversaries. Exploiting this rivalry, “nativist” agitators organized mobs of bullyboys to flex their muscle by striking a blow against the foppish Macready and the Old World’s cultural hegemony that he represented.

The moment Macready took the stage in New York, his adversaries sprang into action, first by throwing insults, then rotten eggs, then chairs. When he dared show his face again, an estimated twenty thousand packed the streets around the theater. As cobblestones from outside rained down on the audience, National Guard troops were called in to quell the riot. Finding themselves outmatched, the Guardsmen discharged their weapons at the crowd, with horrific results. When the smoke cleared, as many as thirty people lay dead, with scores more wounded.

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Chris Herdt says

I read this book in part so that I could update a single sentence on the Wikipedia entry for the Astor Place Riot.

This is a fascinating book: frontier riverboat theaters, illiterates reciting Shakespeare, the first American star actor, bad behavior on both sides of the pond, Charles "Boz" Dickens, and in general a theater atmosphere that is very different from the stuffy blue-haired affairs we often see today.

I often wondered how different this book would have been if its author had been American. For example, the author wrote:

"Even the *Edinburgh Review*, never an uncritical friend of America, saw Trollope's obloquy as all but a *casus belli* for the New World."

I translated this into American:

"The *Edinburgh Review* never did America no favors, but even they eyeballed Trollope's tell-all and saw them was fightin' words!"

Also, a *pas de mouchoir*, you might want to know, is some kind of hanky-wavin' two-step how-d'ye-do that no self-respectin' cowpoke would be caught up in 'cept to make his campmates chuckle 'round the fire. And as I figure, Hamlet ain't the sort of young feller to dude it up like that!

If Mr Cliff or his publisher are interested in translating the entire book into American, I should be happy to oblige for a reasonable fee.

Karin says

An interesting topic, but rather scattered in its approach, and I found myself bored as often as I was interested. The author failed to find a sympathetic person to follow through this history; certainly the two actors around whom the biggest riots happened were not particularly likable. I read this because the title fulfilled a challenge and because I tend to be interested in theatre. However, this book fell short of my expectations.

itpdx says

How Shakespeare was perceived in the young American republic, how his plays were performed, how the business of theater worked at the time, the beginnings of American literature, relations with Great Britain post War of 1812, how NYC grew and changed during this time, the impact of mass Irish immigration, the rise of gangs, the growth of class based on wealth. This book covers a lot of interesting history focused on the Shakespeare riots of 1849 in New York City. But for me the author does not bring it all together.

Dana Stabenow says

Three centuries after Shakespeare died, across the pond New Yorkers rioted over the relative merits of Macbeth as played by a British actor and an American one. The National Guard was called out, people actually died, and the British actor had to be hustled out of the country for his own safety. America had embraced Shakespeare as one of their own, and he was read so extensively and so intensively that audiences from rural Kentucky to the California gold mines could shout out the correct line when an actor in performance stumbled over it.

Author Cliff concludes, "Once a voice carried a people across a continent and helped forge a brave new world. No other writer has been so powerful, and no one ever will be again." This book includes a survey of 19th century American history, a history of Western theatre, is peopled with great characters and you-are-there settings, and has a quotable phrase on nearly every page.

Wild says

This is a richly detailed history of the origins of the "culture wars" that took place between England and America in the early to mid 1800's. These so-called "culture wars" took the form of Shakespearean theater: which country performed the best Shakespeare play, who had the best actor, and which country had the most loyal fandom of the Bard. Was it England, from whence the birthplace of Shakespeare could be claimed? Or was it U.S.A., who insisted that the eternal playwright struck a chord in every American's heart, even on the wildest frontier of the West?

Nigel Cliff's first book strives to uncover the most interesting facets of the development of 19th century Shakespearean theater, ranging from England's Covent Garden and Drury Lane, to the eventual migration of the Bard to America's theaters in New York City, Philadelphia and Boston. This was a time when theater was THE form of entertainment, and also a time when socioeconomic forces threatened to force which class of people would be the mainstay of the paying audience.

It is here, where Cliff gives an eye-opening account of the infamous Astor Place Theater riots in New York City on May 10, 1849. This is the first time in American history where the military was called in to disperse, by gunfire, a huge mob of rioters whose origins had a lot more to do with political and social unrest than an emotionally charged competition between the American actor, Edwin Forrest, and the English actor, William Macready.

Although I enjoyed this book thoroughly, I found that it was not cohesive at times, and due to enormous details in subject matter that sometimes made it difficult to stay on task, I would give this a 3 1/2 star rating.

Dan says

Without NPR I'm nothing. I swear.

There was a discussion of this book with the author one morning, and the idea caught me. With passions still running high after our break from British rule in the late 1700's, two friendly (and illustrious) Shakespearean

actors put their friendship aside and fought with each other, publicly and onstage, with such ill consequence that it led to a riot in front of the theater at which one was performing. The personalities were interesting, the circumstance deliciously catty. That morning, I actually put my knitting aside, to hear about this chapter in American theatrical history. By afternoon the book was in my hands. I gulped it down.

A fun, rewarding read.
