

Asserting Cultural Dominance:
The 1990 RSC Production of
Two Shakespearean Actors

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The American playwright Richard Nelson had his *Two Shakespearean Actors* premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 1990.¹ Nelson's play has its base in a riot which resulted in the death of thirty-four people on 10 May 1849 outside the Astor Place Opera House in New York City, where the British actor, William Charles Macready, was performing *Macbeth*, which was also in the repertoire of his American rival, Edwin Forrest, at another theatre in the same city.² The root of the catastrophe was Macready's rivalry with Forrest, but Nelson refrains from giving us much idea of how deep their personal vendetta really went. His play is about theatre as a metaphor for post-colonial Anglo-American misunderstandings and resentments. The America of the 1840s was a country trying to

¹The production, directed by Roger Michell, opened on 29 August 1991 at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Macready was played by John Carlisle and Anton Lesser enacted Forrest.

²Macready (1793–1873) was a celebrated tragedian who became the manager of the Covent Garden Theatre (1837–39) and later the Drury Lane Theatre (1841–43). He was an internalising actor who sought out the psychology of dramatic characters.

define itself. Having been successful in two wars, the War of Independence and the War of 1812,³ it was making every effort to break away from the dominance of British culture.

Shakespeare is a cultural icon of the highest order. As long as the British were supposed to be the only ones who could interpret him correctly, their cultural dominance over the English-speaking world remained unchallenged. For American actors to appropriate Shakespeare meant asserting American cultural independence or even supremacy. In *Two Shakespearean Actors*, Forrest believes that his interpretations restore the authentic meaning of Shakespeare. To legitimate his claim, he has even purchased a copy of the First Folio—which he interprets with the great bibliographical naiveté of his times.

The play also deals with the power and mystery of acting itself and, above all, of acting Shakespeare, an author who defies all attempts at definitive readings and appropriations. In the final scene, Macready takes refuge from the rioters in Forrest's dressing room, where the two actors become immersed in a detailed discussion of

³The 'War of 1812' declared on Britain by the United States lasted two years, and ended up without either side winning. The *casus belli* had been the British naval blockade against Napoleon in Europe, which damaged American commercial interests, but many expansionists hoped that the United States could conquer Canada, then a British colony. Enormous destruction was brought about by the war on the American territory (even the White House was burned down by the Royal Marines), although a few American victories convinced the British, who had in the meantime defeated Napoleon and lifted the blockade, to abandon their plans for the total destruction of the United States. The terms of the peace treaty were status quo antebellum. However, public opinion in the US perceived the outcome of the war as a victory.

Shakespearean technique in a common enthusiasm for their profession.

This paper seeks to provide an examination of the above-mentioned themes through the RSC's interpretation of the play, referring to the historical background to the riot.

The opening scene of the play is set on 3 May 1849, a week before the Astor Place riot, when Macready, after rehearsing a production of *Macbeth*, gives patronising compliments to his American supporting actors:

And I am not speaking as an Englishman to—. (*Beat.*) No, I happen to love American—. Everything here is so—. It's rich. [...] I think American accents, they are so much closer to what Shakespeare himself spoke. You are so much closer. I think this has almost been proven. I mean, you—as American actors—. [...] Much closer to what Shakespeare himself spoke! You! Without even—. Just instinctively. All one's sophistication it really can get in the way, can't it?! (*Laughs.*) (pp. 3–4)⁴

Macready is condescending about America, Americans and in particular American actors' ability to play Shakespeare. His sense of cultural superiority becomes clearer in a later scene on the same day when he tells John Ryder about the crucial present situation in which

⁴The text used for the production was Richard Nelson, *Two Shakespearean Actors* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990). All quotations from the play are from this text.

anti-colonial sentiment fuels Forrest's local popularity and threatens his own show. Macready asks Ryder to go and suggest to Forrest that he should withdraw his *Macbeth* and replace it with *Metamora*, his provocative American nationalist drama.⁵ Macready believes that Americans are childlike and instinctive, unhampered by English sophistication,⁶ and naturally suited, therefore, to playing Red Indians: "I understand he is especially convincing as an Indian. Americans can be, you know. An Englishman would be hopeless as a savage" (p. 21).

The fact that English remained the language of the United States of America, notwithstanding the Revolution, ensured that Shakespeare's plays would continue to dominate the repertoires of the many new theatres that were built as the frontier expanded westwards. The building of these playhouses encouraged leading British actors to continue to set the standards of performance and production.⁷ Macready was among those actors and he made his third and final journey in America in 1848–49. A complaint made by the

⁵Historically, Macready brought in an American, C.W. Clarke, as Macduff, which had usually been acted by John Ryder, in an effort to temper the anti-British feeling. On the night of 7 May there were three performances of *Macbeth* in New York, for Thomas Sowerby Hamblin (1800–1853) had also decided to play the part at the Bowery Theatre; Ryder went down to appear as Hamblin's Macduff, and not Forrest's. See *The Journal of William Charles Macready: 1832–1851*, abridged and edited by J.C. Trewin (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1967), p. 261.

⁶See MACREADY: "American people are really rather charming and decent as well as intelligent in an instinctive sort of way"; "Not only are they quick to learn, they are eager. They're more like children than us old jaded English actors" (p. 42).

⁷Glynne Wichkam, *A History of the Theatre*, 2nd edn (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), pp. 195–96.

American actor Scott in *Two Shakespearean Actors*, whose role of Macduff in Forrest's production of *Macbeth* was, because of an injury, taken over by the British actor Ryder, reveals the restive feelings that American actors and audiences in general often felt about British dominance in the American theatre: "We don't need them, that's all I want to say. (*Beat.*) Go home! Leave us alone! We don't want you! We don't need you taking our jobs!" (p. 70) However, eventually American actors in turn began to challenge this situation. The first to dare to do it was John Howard Payne, who appeared successfully both at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1849 and at the Comédie Française. He was followed in 1836 by Forrest, whose opening role at Drury Lane was Spartacus in *The Gladiator* by Robert M. Bird, an American playwright. The play was condemned, the actor applauded. In spite of the special fitness which Forrest showed for this character, he failed to make the play acceptable to the English audience. Most of the critics deplored its crude physical effects or dismissed it as the expectable product of a frontier society. However, they recognized Forrest's fitness to take the place of their own great actors in Shakespearean performances. His Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and Richard III were generally well received.

Edwin Forrest (1806–72), a Philadelphian, is customarily regarded as the first great American actor, his predecessors and rivals, Junius Brutus Booth (1796–1852) and Thomas Abthorpe Cooper (1776–1849) being English by birth. He was a dark-haired, coldly handsome, muscular man with a powerful voice, and rose swiftly to stardom. In 1828, he attempted to encourage native dramatic authorship: he of-

ferred prizes for plays which would express the ideas of democracy in action, plays which would advance the great cause of human liberty. A thunderous melodrama called *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, by the actor-playwright John Augustus Stone, was the first play to win the competition. Produced in 1829, it provided Forrest with an appealing character, Metamora, an Indian chieftain, who defends his people against the white aggression and finally kills his wife, Nahmeokee, to save her from falling into the hands of the British, and dies himself from the bullets of his foes. The second play to win Forrest's prize was Robert M. Bird's tragedy, *The Gladiator*, which was produced in 1831. Among nine dramas in all, including seven more which-won prizes over the next few years, *Metamora* and *The Gladiator* were long popular in Forrest's repertoire.⁸ They exactly fitted his own physique, temper, and style.

When Macready, at thirty-three, was making his first starring visit to America in 1826, Forrest, at twenty, was just exploding into stardom. They did not meet then, but Macready saw Forrest playing Mark Antony at the Bowery Theatre, and was sufficiently impressed

⁸Forrest kept the plays out of print so that no one else could perform them during his life time. *Metamora* exists now only in a manuscript fragment, limited to the part of Metamora, in the Edwin Forrest Home for Aged and Infirm Actors in Philadelphia. Although it was not the first Indian play, *Metamora* started the great vogue of the aboriginal drama and established the stage convention for the Indian dialect, a curious mixture of Ossian and the real Indian speech. *Dictionary of American Biography*, edited by Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935-1936), IX, 77.

by him.⁹ In 1836 they met for the first time when Macready invited Forrest, who was then playing at Drury Lane, to dinner. On Macready's second trip to America in 1843, Forrest welcomed him cordially, repaying every social courtesy Macready had paid to him in London. They maintained social relations, exchanged visits, and preserved at least a show of amiability, while feeling rampant jealousy and enmity for each other for all those years. In 1845 Forrest made his second professional tour of Great Britain. The theatrical world in London was going through a period of uncertainty and turmoil caused by the revision of the Licensing Act in 1843. The monopoly of Covent Garden and Drury Lane over spoken drama had been abolished and, paradoxically, the result was that no spoken drama was being produced at all in London. Managers preferred to stage opera or light entertainment. Several leading English actors, including Macready, were unemployed. Then the manager of the Princess's Theatre thought of breaking the impasse by offering the public something completely new. He would produce a series of tragedies starring two American actors, the famous Edwin Forrest and the still unknown Charlotte Cushman (1816–76). In such a difficult environment, Forrest's London engagement turned out to be a disappointment. According to Cushman, his *Macbeth* was "hissed to death" by the audience and "cut to pieces by the critics."¹⁰ His other roles, with

⁹The most critical public supported the Park Theatre, the leading theatre of America, and both they and most of the reviewers preferred the acting of Macready, then on a visit to America, whereas, the patrons of the Bowery Theatre were, what is called, "low brow."

¹⁰Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), I. 79.

the exception of Lear, were also relatively unsuccessful. With no actual grounds for the belief, Forrest nursed the idea that his comparative failure had been brought about by the machinations of Macready. The hostility between Forrest and Macready broke out into open feud a year later on the night of 2 March 1846, in Edinburgh, when Forrest hissed Macready, who was playing Hamlet that night at the Edinburgh Theatre Royal.

Immediately before the entrance of the court for the play scene, at "I must be idle," Macready executed his customary expression of indifference by flirting his handkerchief above his head and strutting back and forth across the front of the stage. Suddenly "a man on the right side of the stage—upper boxes or gallery, but said to be upper boxes—hissed!"; Macready "bowed derisively and contemptuously to the individual,"¹¹ who was soon put to silence by the applause of the audience. The hisser was Forrest. The rumour said that it was he, and the fact was confirmed on 4 April 1846 when he published a letter in the London *Times* not only claiming the action but justifying it: he had a right as a spectator to criticize Macready's "fancy dance," which he thought to be "a desecration of the scene."¹² In England, Forrest was widely criticized for his gesture. News of this incident quickly reached America, and Forrest received a hero's welcome when he returned there in late summer of 1846. The case became a matter of patriotism; the Democrats rallied to vindicate his honour and that of the nation insulted in his person. Thus, the feud

¹¹*The Journal of William Charles Macready: 1832–1851*, p. 233.

¹²Montrose J. Moses, *The Fabulous Forrest: The Record of an American Actor* (New York & London: Benjamin Blom, 1929; repr. 1969), pp. 221–22.

between the two tragedians passed from the theatrical into the political sphere.

The American audiences of 1849 were fired by strong passions. The social revolution was in progress; democracy—especially “Jacksonian democracy”—was flaunted in face of the aristocratic conservatives as the particular right of the common people.¹³ In the great debate between “democrats” and “aristocrats”, Forrest planted himself with the Democrats, with the oppressed against the oppressors, with the common people against the arrogant rich. Forrest’s democratic bias was accompanied by a flaming patriotism which grew hotter as he grew older, and the two passions fused into a sort of class hatred. He resented the intelligentsia and sophisticates in American society because they took their values from Europe, from Britain. Macready, his senior by 13 years, with all stateliness and class, epitomised British culture. Thus the matter became a social schism which

¹³Andrew Jackson (1767–1845) was captured by British forces in the War of Independence, which also caused the death of his mother and two brothers. From this experience he supposedly derived his lifelong hostility to Britain. He became a military hero during the War of 1812. In 1818, as commander of the southern district, he hastened the US acquisition of Florida by invading this territory, which belonged Spain. In 1828, he became president of the United States, and was reelected in 1832. Jackson was a wealthy man of conservative social beliefs, but he and his followers, the Democrats, successfully depicted themselves as the people’s party and their opponents, the Whigs, as “aristocrats.” Between 1837, when Jackson retired, and 1860, four Democratic presidents were elected. In fact, Democratic policies and appointees were hardly more radical than Whig ones. The expansion of the role of the masses in politics which undoubtedly took place in the two decades after the War of 1812 was once credited to Jackson and his followers, but most reforms either antedated the emergence of the Democrats or were opposed by them. However, the myth of an “Era of the Common Man” or “Jacksonian democracy” has proved to be long-lasting.

brought the intelligentsia to the side of Macready, and the Anglophobes to championing Forrest as their symbol of nationalism, their excuse for open riot.

In the autumn of 1848, when Macready arrived in America, the popular press was already fanning the flames of animosity against him. Some praised Forrest for the “independence” he had exhibited at Edinburgh, others harped on Macready’s age and effete-ness, and his “aristocratic” leanings.¹⁴ Although nothing fatal occurred until 10 May 1849, acts of hostility were committed during his tour. On 20 November 1848, when he took his touring production of *Macbeth* to Philadelphia, Forrest’s hometown, his audience spent most of the opening evening fighting with itself—the greater part applauding, the lesser part yelling, hooting, and hissing. A copper cent and a rotten egg were thrown on the stage, but no serious violence was attempted. When Macready produced *Hamlet* in Cincinnati on 2 April 1849, one of the audience in the gallery threw onto the stage half a dead sheep. By the time the tour reached New York a few weeks later, matters deteriorated.

Macready’s opening night at the Astor Place Opera House was Monday, May 7. *Macbeth* was the play announced, and on the same night Forrest appeared as the same character at the Broadway Theatre. In *Two Shakespearean Actors*, Richard Nelson creates a scene

¹⁴Shattuck, p. 80.

in which the two rival actors meet but, because of their pride and personal enmity, fail to discuss the topic of the threats against Macready's production. As a result, no measure to ameliorate the situation is considered. The scene is set in the evening on Friday May 4, at the New York Hotel where Macready is staying.

FORREST: Mr Macready, Mr Ryder was telling me about some threats against . . . (*Turns to RYDER*) Who exactly were they against?

MACREADY: Threats?

RYDER: About Monday. About the two *Macbeths*.

MACREADY: Threats??

RYDER: About being foreign. The letters you received.

MACREADY: Threats???

RYDER: You asked me to talk to Mr Forrest and—.

MACREADY: Oh those. Silly ridiculous rumours. I'm sure the same must happen to you, Mr Forrest. Jealous people.

FORREST: In England it happens to me all the time. (*Beat.*)

MACREADY: One learns to ignore such thing. (p. 48–49)

The first night of Macready's production of the Scottish play ended in disaster: his entrance was received with thunders of applause, which at first gratified him. He bowed respectfully, repeatedly. The applause went on and on, and gradually he began to distinguish howlings which made themselves audible from the parquette. He realized that there was opposition, and that the prolongation of the applause was the struggle against it. Placards were displayed, with the words, "You have been proved a liar!" and "No apologies—it is too late!"

The play went on unheard. Copper cents, apples, potatoes, lemons, pieces of wood, rotten eggs, and even a bottle of asafoetida were hurled toward him as he proceeded through his speeches in seeming pantomime. By the third act chairs were being thrown down from the gallery, making life on the stage and in the orchestra pit altogether too dangerous. Finally Macready gave orders to lower the curtain, while the rioters yelled, "Down with the English hog!" and "Three groans for the codfish aristocracy!"¹⁵

Macready reached the conclusion that it was time to terminate his engagement. It was then that *The New York Herald*, for 9 May 1849, published an open letter which insisted that he complete his intended farewell engagement on the American stage, assuring him that the outrages would not be repeated. It was signed by a committee of forty-seven prominent citizens, including Washington Irving and Herman Melville. In *Two Shakespearean Actors*, Washington Irving, as a representative of the leading citizens, visits Macready and his American supporting actors, on 8 May. This is how he describes the rioters who opposed Macready's show on the previous night:

IRVING: They do hate English people. But that is not where their hate ends. They hate culture. They hate art and books and poems and music and thought!! They hate anything that is civilized!! (*Beat.*) We have all seen this side of some of our countrymen, have we not? (*Sighs.*) [. . .] In London you see it so rarely. And in Spain and

¹⁵See *The Journal of William Charles Macready: 1832–1851*, pp. 261–62; Shattuck, pp. 82–83.

Italy—never have I noticed it. But here . . . (*Pause. He suddenly looks up at the others and tries to smile.*) I have been criticized for being—European. My books have . . . (*Stops himself.*) Some things I do not understand any more. (pp. 62–63)

Macready was persuaded to reappear on the 10th as the same character. However, such an assurance of goodwill given to him by the intelligentsia and sophisticates did not have the desired effect of stemming the angry tide of feeling;¹⁶ it was taken as a defiance by the admirers of Forrest, who prepared to meet the issue.

Nelson's Forrest insists that he is not responsible for the previous night's riot, as is clear from the conversation with Boucicault,¹⁷ Ryder, and Fisher, one of Forrest's supporting American actors, which takes place late at night on 8 May:

FORREST: (*Without looking at anyone*) I've heard someone—. Someone was saying—I forget who it was—they were saying that people think I'm somehow . . . (*Beat.*) That I bear a responsibility.

BOUCICAULT: For last night?

FORREST: This is what I've heard.

¹⁶See Scott justifying the 8 May riot in *Two Shakespearean Actors*: "I think they should have shot him [Macready]. That's what I would have liked to see."; "I mean it. (*Beat*) He has not right to be here. People like him have no right. So he gets what he deserves. This is my opinion. (*Beat*) I mean, why the hell did we fight a war? Why did we fight two wars?! They invade us! We threw them off! We don't need the goddamn English telling us—."; "American actors for America! I don't see what is so wrong with that?!" (p. 69)

¹⁷Dion Boucicault (1822–90) was an Irish-born playwright and actor.

FISHER: People are nervous, all kinds of things are being said. [...]

FORREST: As if attacking Macready's *Macbeth* was somehow praising mine. This is thinking I do not grasp myself. (*Smiles.*) It's ridiculous. It's unfair. If they knew—. If only someone had come to me and said there could be trouble. I now understand there were threats made days ago.

RYDER: Mr Forrest—.

FORREST: Let me finish. Where was Mr Macready? Why did he not confide in me? We had dinner only the other day. He said nothing, isn't that right, Mr Ryder? you were there.

RYDER: That's correct. (pp. 74–75)

Forrest is manipulative: he does not allow Ryder, who had informed him about the threats and Macready's wish that he would perform another play, to point out this fact; Ryder does not insist, probably because he is now working for Forrest. Forrest insinuates that it is Macready who should be blamed, because he was too arrogant to seek help from him in person. However, it could also be said that Forrest had been excessively proud and had refused to do Macready a favour without being begged to do so by Macready himself. Forrest decides to replace his *Macbeth* with *Metamora* for a while, which ironically makes the situation worse.

The huge success of Forrest's own performance as *Metamora* was, in fact, an expression of growing American nationalism. The Anglophobe American audiences projected themselves as *Metamora*, who was persecuted and shot by the Redcoats, the English invaders.

They must also have identified themselves with Forrest, an American hero, fighting against another British invader, Macready. Nelson makes it clear to the modern audience that this bizarre outburst of post-colonial assertiveness is the nucleus of the play, in a scene which is set at 2 a.m. on 9 May.

FORREST: Who was it was saying—I chose *Metamora* for tonight, so as to—. What was the word? “Rouse” them?

RYDER: I haven’t heard—.

FORREST: Someone today was praising me for this. I just walked away.

RYDER: How could they think this play—? (*Beat*) (*Realizes:*) Because the Indians are killed by English—.

FORREST: I chose it because they like it! I had to choose something!¹⁸

On the following Thursday, May 10, the Astor Place was guarded by posses of police. An overwhelming audience assembled, and an increasing crowd was outside the theatre. When the curtain rose, there was noisy opposition, but not so much as on the Monday, and after the fourth scene the police swept down on the rowdies, clearing them out of the theatre. Four ringleaders were arrested and locked up in a room under the pit, from where they tried to set fire to the house. The others, being forcibly ejected into the street, seem to have excited the fury of the mob outside, who began bombarding the house. It happened that a sewer was being repaired in the street, therefore a

¹⁸The promptbook, held at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon, contains those lines inserted into the text (p. 79).

plentiful supply of loose paving-stones was ready at hand. Missiles ultimately fell on the audience. Macready was determined to fight to the end, and the play was concluded amid indescribable hubbub. While changing his dress he heard a volley of musketry. Soon there came another, and yet another.

The troops had been called out, cavalry first, then infantry. According to the official version of the facts, they confronted the mob but could not stand there to be annihilated. The order was ultimately given to fire above the heads of the crowd; but the confusion was so terrible that the order was imperfectly heard, and some fired into the crowd. The majority of the mob, however, thought that the cartridges were blank and rushed again to the attack. Then the order was given to aim low, and the mob retired. As a result, about thirty-four persons were killed and many more were wounded in the encounter. After changing clothes with one of the actors, Macready, accompanied by a friend, joined the departing audience and escaped. He was then smuggled in a carriage to New Rochelle, took the train to Boston, where he stayed ten days, and then departed for England on 23 May.

Nelson's play ends with a fictional scene in which Macready, with the help of Ryder, holes up in Forrest's dressing room. Macready and Forrest then engage in a long conversation which effectively brings out how they both share a formidable passion for Shakespeare. Of course, they disagree with one another, because each of them believes he has found the right way to perform the great Shakespearean roles. The discussion of Macready's fancy dance as Hamlet, which (contrary to historical fact) Forrest claims he saw in London, becomes a discussion of professional expertise.

FORREST: A fancy dance? I asked myself. Where does this come from in the play? I knew no reference to it. I had never before seen an actor—.

MACREADY: An expression of his madness. A colour. A texture of the performance.

FORREST: And a costume for this dance which, if I remember correctly, had a dress with a waist up to about the armpits, huge overlarge black gloves—. [...]

MACREADY: The character is mad!

FORREST: Is this Hamlet or Malvolio, I remember saying to myself. But still, I enjoyed it. (*Suddenly turns to MACREADY.*) It's true, Hamlet is mad. And in preparation for my own performance I became a student of the mind's disease, visiting asylums and talking not only with the doctors but also with the ill. And the result of this study, Mr Macready, was the knowledge that true madness is expressed through the heart, not the costume. Madness is not funny clothes, but a funny soul. [...]

MACREADY: You study asylums and I study the play. (pp. 95–96)

Little by little, the corrosive repartee between the two actors gives way to a different atmosphere. The feud between Macready and Forrest is subsumed, through a mutual love of Shakespeare, into a kind of good old thespian camaraderie, while the riot rages unexpired outside. Because of their hypertrophic *egos*, both Macready and Forrest are dissatisfied with the public which, they think, does not understand their perfectionism. They make their way on to a bare stage, and simultaneously realize that they would like to play just for

themselves.

FORREST: It's paradise. Even without an audience.

MACREADY: Especially without an—.

BOTH: Audience. (FORREST *tips Macready's sword, he smiles and they begin to fence.*) (p. 100)

At a certain point, Forrest tries to declaim one of Othello's speeches, but he is choked by tears and has to stop. Macready knows this is because Forest has just been abandoned by his wife, and for the first time expresses human sympathy towards his fellow actor. But time is running out. While departing, Macready again tries to be kind to Forrest, who has just betrayed his innermost emotions. However, the only way Macready can express goodwill is to invite Forrest to England again. This gesture brings back reality. The rift between the two actors, which is also the rift between their countries, cannot be healed.

MACREADY: You should come to England again, Mr Forrest.

(*Beat.*) And get away from all these troubles. (*short pause.*)

FORREST: I'm away from these troubles here.

(MACREADY *nods and leaves with RYDER. Pause. FORREST starts to go, stops and comes back. He looks around the theatre. With sword in hand, he stands, not knowing where else on earth he wants to go.*) (p. 103)

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