



The Man in the Box (extract from The Shakespeare Riots)

<http://www.firstlight.cn> 2009-12-31

One of the bloodiest incidents in nineteenth-century New York, the so-called Astor Place Riot of 10 May 1849, had its unlikely origin in a long-simmering grudge between the two leading Shakespearean actors of the age, William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest. The riot resulted in the unprecedented shooting by American soldiers of dozens of their fellow citizens, leading directly to the arming of American police forces. In this extract from The Shakespeare Riots, Nigel Cliff charts the beginnings of this somewhat comical contretemps between Macready, the haughty lion of the London stage, and Forrest, the first great American star and a popular hero to millions. Equally celebrated, and equally self-centred, the two were once friends, then adversaries. Forrest, blaming Macready for his hostile public and critical reception when playing the Princess's Theatre, London in 1845, openly hissed the English actor as he performed as Hamlet on stage in Edinburgh and subsequently defended his actions in the letter pages of The Times. Behind Forrest's bombast and pique lay the differences between two styles of acting, styles increasingly interpreted along national lines and reflecting contemporary transatlantic friction: to the American, Macready's onstage flamboyance was an effeminate travesty of the manly dignity of a star, while English audiences regarded the American as a throwback to a more florid age.

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