

HISTORICAL NOTES

DAVID MORGAN

An actor's feud that ended in a massacre

Published in *The Independent* [U.K.], April 10, 1999

THE IMPORT of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* into the United States in the mid-1970s has been rightly characterized as a revolution against the sterility of television networks, at the very least. It is comforting that even now, 30 years since its inception, the Pythons' uncompromising, stream-of-consciousness comedy is still hilariously winning; it's also a bit unnerving that, given the cultural landscape today, it is still *necessary*.

"Comedy doesn't want to change the world, and it never does," Michael Palin once said, describing the subversive nature of humor. The United States and England's long shared history of cultural revolutions has rarely spawned anything more dangerous than teen riots and laugh riots. But such skirmishes in the culture wars pale against the massacre sparked by two Shakespearean actors from opposite sides of the pond, William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest.

A leading light of the English stage in the mid-1800s, Macready was noted for his thoughtful approach to roles, but his temper, vanity and selfishness rendered him, in the words of one, "an object of dislike and dread."

The American-born Edwin Forrest was renowned for playing heroes such as Spartacus through sheer lungpower, but working-class audiences appreciated his patriotic zeal. He held a long-

standing feud with Macready based partly on his boiling distaste for the Englishman's aristocratic bearing. During a tour of Britain in 1846, Forrest received a drubbing from the press, for which he blamed Macready, the critics' local darling. Forrest retaliated by hissing noisily from the stalls during Macready's performance of *Hamlet*.

On a later tour of America, Macready made the egregious *faux pas* of offending New Yorkers by characterizing them as boorish and uncultured. Forrest was only too happy to play the provocateur, firing off anti-British letters to the papers; he even spitefully performed the same roles as Macready in competing productions across town.

On 7 May 1849, Macready was headlining a production of *Macbeth* at the Astor Place Opera House. The hall was packed with Forrest's supporters. Angered at a non-American appearing on stage, the audience yelled and threw pennies, eggs, vegetables, and even a bottle of asafoetida towards the actor. When chairs were tossed at Macready's feet, he wisely withdrew. The announcement of a return performance a few days later only inspired local toughs to call for a counter-demonstration.

With the performance oversold (and tickets passed to Forrest's supporters by sympathetic politicians), a rowdy

presence was assured. As the Opera House's doors were barricaded and windows boarded at curtain time, up to 15,000 people milled about outside; some started pelting the building with stones. Inside, hecklers interrupted the performance as rocks broke windows and showered onto the audience.

The militia was soon called in. When the crowds did not disperse, salvos of gunfire rang out in the street, leaving over 100 people injured, nearly two dozen fatally.

Macready smartly escaped to Boston, as the local media wailed against a massacre which cost more American lives than had the Battle of New Orleans.

While the war the actors fought was not entirely about aesthetic differences in interpreting the Bard, and while the hoodlums who tossed bricks probably couldn't tell a Thane from a Cawdor, the riot was revolutionary in that it proved that politics can be inseparable from art regardless of class; and that in an era of growing dominance by celebrity, seen as "a form of elitism," the democratic ideals of the audience held sway, though at a dreadful cost. Of course, it's still ridiculous to imagine people being killed because they thought an actor stank.

David Morgan is the author of "Monty Python Speaks" (4th Estate, £12.99)