

Charlotte and Ned's Benefit

by

Mickey Bolmer

with scenes from
(in order of appearance)
Fazio by H. H. Milman
Macbeth by William Shakespeare
Douglas by John Home
London Assurance by Dion Boucicault
The Gladiator by Robert Montgomery Bird
Damon and Pithias by John Banim
Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare
King Lear by William Shakespeare
Othello by William Shakespeare
Metamora by John Augustus Stone

Two old ghosts
materialize on a set for *Macbeth*
Charlotte Cushman
founding actor, Mayflower descendent
first great lady of the stage, friend of Lincoln
famous for her Romeo played to her sister's Juliet
modeled for sculptor partner Emma Stebbins Bethesda fountain angel
Ned Forrest
founding actor, Philadelphia apprentice
most popular of the 19th century
commissioned plays with contests
25 die 120 injured the Astor Place riot
to prove Ned the world's greatest Macbeth
founding actors do their greatest scenes
as a benefit
for

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read April 8, 2006 by The New Play House, Frederick, MD directed by Jonah S. Knight

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Characters

Charlotte Cushman (25-40)
Edwin Forrest (25-40)
Male Utility Actor
Female Utility Actor

Set

an unadorned Macbeth; a platform center stage with two chairs

Thoughts

To honor the sometimes long introductions to the plays commissioned by Edwin Forrest (Before *Jack Cade*, Judge Conrad's history of villeinage is fascinating), I offer a few thoughts. I bring Ned and Charlotte back as ghosts so that they can be aware of the many changes in theater between their deaths and their Benefit. While I have no doubt that the actors could recapture the essence of Charlotte and Ned's acting, these actors will have to play for a contemporary audience. From what I can tell, Charlotte and Ned's audiences went to the theatre much like we go to baseball games. They, a wide range of people as to education, wealth, and class, entered the theatre knowing the players and the plays. They kept "box score," waiting for, appreciating, and comparing line readings, business, voice, passion, and effect. They stood and shouted, sometimes wept, for great play.

Charlotte and Ned's audiences were closer to Shakespeare's audiences than we are to theirs. Photography was a new art and people spent little time with visual reproductions; the positive of that negative is how easily, even eagerly, people then engaged with word pictures and how lively and honored an art was poetry. Some of the verse here is brilliant; some is not. My guess is that Charlotte and Ned's audiences knew these differences in poetry just as we know baseball teams, that they could thrill at drama in verse that was less than Shakespearean just as we can enjoy a great play even when our team is at the bottom, and that sometimes the team at the bottom out plays the team at the top. My guess is that one reason that Charlotte and Ned were hugely popular stars was that they played every play as if it had been written by Shakespeare.

Finally, let me offer Zoe Caldwell's advice in her excellent I will be Cleopatra An Actress's Journey: (p. 21-22) "I am forever grateful to Mum for allowing me to correct her writing, because it taught me to follow the "score" of a playwright and quickly know what he or she wanted the audience to know. When I act, direct, or teach, I act, direct, and teach punctuation. (...) I've learned that if you cease to think about yourself and concentrate on obeying the punctuation, the pressure is removed, and you will reveal yourself and be Hamlet; and because the body and soul are uniquely yours, you will be 'your' Hamlet."

Act 1

(Charlotte before the curtain, unaware that she has materialized, using this monologue from Fazio by H.H. Milman, Act 3 sc. 1 to talk to herself. Charlotte premiered in London as Bianca and this is part of Bianca's deciding speech.)

CHARLOTTE and BIANCA

Not all the night, not all the long, long night,
Not come to me! not send for me! not think on me!

Like an unrighteous and unburied ghost,
I wander up and down these long arcades.

Oh, I am here so wearily miserable,
That I should welcome my apostate Fazio,
Though he were fresh from Aldabella's arms.

Her arms!---her viper coil---I had forsworn
That thought, lest he should come again and find me mad,

(the curtain rises; enter Ned with two American flags that he places
down stage right and left)

Ned, don't do that! This is Macbeth.

NED

Ha!

CHARLOTTE

Ah the famous Forrest Ha!

NED

Ha!

(This "ha!" and Charlotte's previous "ha!" together)

There was a time when my Ha! brought forth cheers.

CHARLOTTE

So you made rule one of the Ned Forrest school of playwriting

NED

Not a school, a club, a play development club

CHARLOTTE

Rule one: in every scene, Ha!

NED

(They jump at each other as they say Ha! at the same moment.)

Ha!

NED

Again

NED & CHARLOTTE

(They jump at the audience)

Ha!

CHARLOTTE

What's happening?

NED

"And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and name."

CHARLOTTE

I didn't know you played Theseus.

NED

Ha! Charlotte, do something. Your first line.

CHARLOTTE

"They met me in the day of success."

NED

Ha! Dear Charlotte, we are Ha! here!

CHARLOTTE

Don't be silly. Sit down, Ned. The play is late tonight.
(“Today” if it's a matinee)

NED

Duncan drunk again.

CHARLOTTE

Plus Ça Change. Why Ned? Mr. Dickens had Marley show Scrooge pitiful wraiths
bound to earth by chains forged of their misdeeds, each one now desperate but
unable to aid their fellow men. Why must we

NED

ghosts be?

CHARLOTTE

wander here?

NED

Do you see anything wound round me?

CHARLOTTE

Every role you ever played. Take the flags off.

NED

Once, Charlotte, well after the War, I arrived at a small western town. We rehearsed Hamlet; I went back to the hotel, ate, rested, and returned to find that the manager had hung two American flags at the stage openings. Old Glory was it: drop curtains, palace, platform, chamber, and castle. We performed a powerful Hamlet.

CHARLOTTE

Macbeth again is some sort of curse.

MALE UTILITY ACTOR

(entering, dressed as Macduff to remove the flags but sees Charlotte and Ned.)

The play is just about to begin.

NED

Ha!

MALE UTILITY ACTOR

Let me show you to your seats.

FEMALE UTILITY ACTOR

(running on, dressed for Lady Macbeth)

I know you! You are, you are playing Charlotte Cushman.

CHARLOTTE

I am Charlotte Cushman, or I was until I died.

NED

I am Edwin Forrest. Take our seats! This is my Walnut Street Theatre. She was once the manageress. This is my home

CHARLOTTE

and tomb.

NED

No longer! Charlotte, we are now here! A Benefit, let's do a Benefit! Ned and Charlotte's Benefit.

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte and Ned's Benefit sounds better. How do you know me, my dear?