

Our Theatrical Heritage

Tony Pastor: The Father of Vaudeville

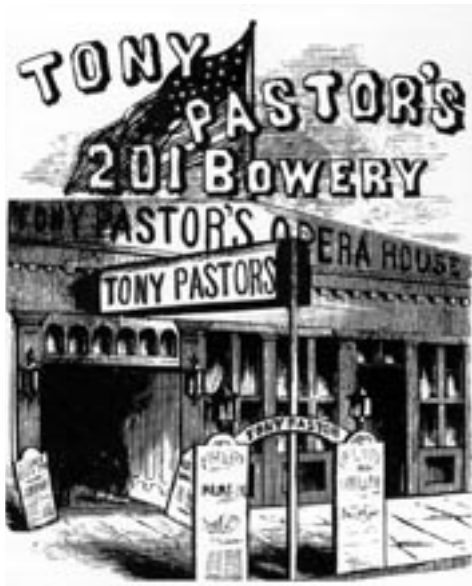


Tony Pastor, showman

Most Elks know their order was originally a drinking club called the Jolly Corks, founded in New York in 1867 by the English comic singer Charles Vivian. Some Elks even know the names and occupations of the fifteen “original Jolly Corks.” But there was a common denominator for most of these performers that is less known today: Tony Pastor.

The *History of the Order of Elks* reports that “just before the holidays--Charles Vivian [& fellow Corks] returning one afternoon from a funeral of a friend--Ted Quinn, of local concert hall fame--dropped into Tony Pastor's. There they found Billy Gray, Tony and 'Dody' Pastor, John Fielding and William Sheppard, who became interested in the story of the 'Jolly Corks,' and all of them strolled over from Pastor's to 'Sandy' Spencer's, where they found George F. McDonald and others.

After hearing the story of the funeral the 'Jolly Corks' had attended, McDonald suggested that the organization should become a 'protective and benevolent society.' During the next week or ten days McDonald broached the idea to a



number of Jolly Corks ...” (WP 12).

That the Jolly Corks would go by Tony Pastor's Opera House on 201 Bowery is no surprise. In the winter of 1867 and spring of 1868, the period when the Elks were founded, many Corks were associated with Pastor's: William Carleton was singing his native Irish songs there, and G.W. Thompson began an engagement in *The Shipwrecked Sailor*. *The Black Crook*, which scandalized New York with its “large number of female legs,” was parodied by Pastor's *The White Crook*, in which Corks Thomas G. Riggs, George F. McDonald, and William Sheppard played the respective roles of *Black Crook* starlets Rosina Paganini, Marie Bonfanti, and Betty Rigl.

Even our founder Charles Vivian appeared at Pastor's on April 20th, 1868, along with *The Dry Goods Clerks of New York* and Pastor's “troupe of performing dogs and monkeys.” (OD 353-5)

Pastor and his brothers, William and Fernando, were involved with the Elks almost from the beginning, appearing respectively as numbers 135, 318, and 8 on the Elks' membership role. Fernando, member # 8, was especially enthusiastic, but died of consumption in 1876 at thirty-three.

Tony Pastor brought his knack for organization to the Elks. As an early historian of the order relates, “Brother Pastor was ... the maker of the motion to create a Grand Lodge, which formed the beginning of the present Order of Elks.” (CE 327) His signature is featured prominently on the Grand Lodge Charter.



Pastor was born in New York City, and drawn to show business from an early age. At one point his father sent him to the countryside in an effort to curb his boyhood penchant for performance, but the field hands were so distracted with laughing at his impromptu antics that he was sent back.

As he grew older, Tony Pastor performed for P.T. Barnum and was featured prominently at “the 444,” a concert saloon which was then managed by Robert Butler. This is the same man who later gave our founder, Charles Vivian, his U.S. premier at Robert Butler's American Theater.

Pastor first made a name for himself as a comic singer and performer at the 444. In particular, he was known for his pro-Union patriotism. He seems to have been the first stage performer to have ended his performances with a sing-along-version of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” a practice that became a personal trademark.



Pastor was pro-draft at a time when this was a dangerous stance, especially with the Irish immigrants who formed a significant portion of his audience. In 1863, New York City erupted into draft riots, lynchings, and street battles with police that did not subside until federal troops intervened. At least once when Pastor sang a pro-draft song, a cordon of bartenders had to struggle for several minutes to eject cat-calling, object-hurling members of the audience. (PZ 1-22)

Pastor is best remembered today for his ties to vaudeville. This historian's account is typical:

“The most immediate roots of vaudeville ... were in the concert saloon, from which it drew its audience, structure, and performers. In virtually all accounts, the key figure in its development was ‘the father of vaudeville,’ Tony Pastor. ... In 1865, he opened Pastor's 201 Bowery Opera House, and he spent the next ten years successfully riding a fine line between retaining his concert saloon base and trying to expand his audience.” (JC 132-3)

Pastor walked this line by attempting to bring more women into the audience, at first with special, family-friendly matinee performances, and then by making his evening shows more “chaste.” This emphasis on bringing in women, which could potentially double his audiences, accelerated when he moved his theater from the Bowery to Broadway in 1875. By 1885 had succeeded in creating what one newspaper noted was “the only vaudeville theatre in New York that is patronized by the ladies.” (PZ 85) This would change in the 1890s as vaudeville, thanks in no small part to Pastor's pioneering efforts, found its legs and began to flourish.

In addition to helping form the Grand Lodge, Pastor was an incorporator of the Actor's Fund, a charity organization for performers. He also helped many people launch their careers. In addition to a good many Corks and Elks, Pastor discovered and promoted 1890s siren Lillian Russell, and George M. Cohan, later celebrated in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.



Lillian Russell

Late in life Pastor became an avuncular figure: recognized and revered, but also eclipsed by the success of the very variety industry he pioneered. After his 1907 funeral, his remains were conveyed to the Brooklyn Lodge of the Elks, where they lay in state until a special ceremony the next afternoon. The *Mirror* newspaper reported that “The spacious clubhouse of the Elks was crowded to suffocation and thousands of people stood in the street during the services.” 400 members of the New York Elks Lodge walked several blocks as an escort during the funeral procession to Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn. (PZ 111)



Caricature of Pastor

—Warren Hedges

References

CE: Charles Ellis. *An Authentic History of the BPOE* 1910. **OD:** George O'Dell. *Annals of the New York Stage* vol. 8, 1936. **JC:** Jim Cullen. *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the U.S.* 1996. **PZ:** Parker Zellers. *Tony Pastor, Dean of the Vaudeville Stage* 1971. **WP:** William Phillips, 1922, reprinted in James Nicholson, *History of the Order of Elks* 1992.

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Shakespeare & the Elks: the 19th Century Stage

The early Elks came from virtually every niche of stage entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century: comic singers, musicians, actors, acrobats, ethnic performers, and managers and promoters such as Tony Pastor, profiled in May's *Ashland Elk*.

Surprisingly (at least to us today) many of these popular entertainers, not just the actors, would have had some contact with Shakespearean subject matter. Shakespeare was an integral part of 19th century popular culture, and was performed in ways and settings that would perplex, or even alarm, today's audiences.

To begin with, it is difficult to overestimate how well-known Shakespeare's characters and plays were. The frequency with which his works were parodied is a good indication of this, since parody depends on familiarity with the original. Tony Pastor and his troupe, which included many Elks, presented performances like "Richard III, the Crookedest Man in New York." And Elk G.W. Griffin penned farces such as "Hamlet the Dainty." In this play the ghost of Hamlet's father tells his son that he was murdered, but not by poison in his ear:

"One afternoon, as was my use,
I went to a gin mill to take a snooze—
When your uncle into my mouth did pour
A gallon of brandy smash, or more." (SW 121)



Founding Elk &
Bowery Favorite
GW Thompson

The Shakespeare these audiences were familiar with, however, was not the remote representative of elite culture that many people think of today. As anyone who has attended an OSF performance knows, Shakespeare's plays are funny and entertaining, complete with opportunities for slapstick, jokes, and sexual word play.

But sadly, today most people view Shakespeare as a figure demanding mandatory reverence, a sort of theatrical museum piece, isolated and inviolate, but dead nonetheless.

In the early to mid-19th century, audiences attending shows at venues such as the Bowery Theater saw Shakespeare not as remote from day to day culture, but as part of it. A Shakespeare performance would include not only the play but also a farcical afterpiece and a variety of specialities between acts, including comic songs, acrobats, humorous sketches, and shows by trained dogs and monkeys. In short, the very kinds of performances that many early Elks performed. As one cultural historian puts it, "Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was popular entertainment." (LL UP 146)

As the 19th century moved into the 20th, this more democratic Shakespeare was gradually replaced by a more revered, if less well-known figure. A key part of this change was a change in the make-up of audiences and the behaviors expected of them. As the Elks evolved, their performers and venues reflected and reacted to these changes.



The Bowery Theater

Writing of the performances before the Civil War, Walt Whitman recalled "any good night at the old Bowery, pack'd from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well dress'd, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics—the emotional nature of the whole mass arous'd by the power and magnetism of as mighty mimes as ever trod the stage—the whole crowded auditorium, and what seeth'd in it, and flush'd from its faces and eyes, to me as much a part of the show as any—bursting forth in one of those long-kept-up tempests of hand-clapping peculiar to the Bowery—no dainty kid-glove business, but electric force and muscle of perhaps 2000 full-sinew'd men ..." (WW 595)

Theaters were good venues for Whitman to encounter able-bodied workmen because all classes of male society were in attendance. Boxes were reserved for wealthy patrons, workmen and the "middling" classes occupied the main floor, while the third floor galleries were set aside for newsboys, free African Americans, and prostitutes and their patrons. (DG 46-76)

Especially before the Civil War, audience behavior was more likely to be dictated by the pit and the gallery than the boxes, and this made for a boisterous time, more like attending a football game today than politely listening in silence. Audiences were also prone to interact with whatever was happening on stage. In one performance of *Richard III* at the Bowery in 1832, when Richard and Richmond began to fight, the audience "made a ring around the combatants to see fair play, and kept them at it for nearly a quarter of an hour..." (LL UP 151). In New Orleans, as Othello grieved that Desdemona had lost his handkerchief (which functioned something like an engagement ring), a boatman exclaimed "Why don't you blow your nose with your fingers and let the play go on?" (DG 60)

In Sacramento, when actor Hugh McDermott deviated too far from the sense of *Richard III* by stabbing Henry after he had fallen, the stage was pelted with "cabbages, carrots, pumpkins, potatoes, a wreath of vegetables, a sack of flour and one of soot, [and] a dead goose ..." This revitalized the dead Henry, who fled the stage along with Richard. (LL UP 150 -51)

19th century Shakespeare was sometimes a source of violent cultural and national antagonisms, and nowhere was this more apparent than the rivalry between the American Edwin Forrest and British actor William Macready.

Edwin Forrest's vigorous, over-the-top style of acting was well-suited to his boisterous audiences, but these traits did not



Forrest as MacBeth

serve him as well when he played in London to unfavorable reviews. Talented but egocentric as King Lear, one of his best characters, Forrest accused Macready of stirring up hostility and hissed at his rival's performance of MacBeth in an Edinburgh production. The dispute spilled into the press and came to a head in 1849, when Macready and Forrest were slated to appear in rival productions of *MacBeth* in New York.



Macready as MacBeth

On his first night at the Astor Place Opera House, Macready found himself confronted by Forrest's working class supporters, who drowned out his lines with cries such as "down with the codfish aristocracy." In the third act he was driven

from the stage by a barrage of eggs, potatoes, and, finally, chairs. Macready planned to leave the country, but a committee of dismayed citizens, including writers Washington Irving and Herman Melville, persuaded him to try a repeat performance, this one protected by armed policemen. Troublesome members of the audience were ejected, but a crowd of as many as 10,000 gathered outside the building. When the crowd attempted to storm the building, the police fired warning shots, then over the heads of the crowd, which then dispersed. Unfortunately, onlookers and passersby were struck, and at least 22 people were killed, and over 150 injured. (LL H/L 63-66, DG 67-75)



The Astor Place Riot

The riot was a watershed. As the century progressed, middle class audiences moved to more upscale theaters and began to enforce a quiet, respectful attention to performances. Shakespeare began his American journey from popular to elite culture, from entertainment to edification. As they pursued their careers on stage, the early Elks had to negotiate these changes.

—Warren Hedges

References

- DG:** David Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled*.
LL H/L: Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.
LL UP: Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*.
SW: Stanley Wells. *19th Century Shakespeare Burlesques*. vol 5. **WW:** "The Old Bowery." Walt Whitman, *Prose Works of 1892*. v2.