

“Shakespeare in the Bowery” – Antebellum Theater, Class Conflict, and Nationalist Masculinity

1. Karl Knortz made the hyperbolic observation; “There is assuredly, no other country on earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem as in America, the very country so much decried for its lust for money.” (pg 18) What can we glean from the widespread popularity of Shakespeare’s works? What factors made Shakespeare so popular that it was perceived to be almost as universally embraced as the bible?
2. When Levine talks about politicians moving away from using or referencing Shakespeare in their speeches, he says; “William Shakespeare had become *culture*.” (pg 34) What does he mean by this? How is it relevant to politics?
3. As Shakespeare and theater spread across America, Stars began to emerge. Shakespearean actors who became famous for how they portrayed a role, or came to America to put on shows due to Shakespeare’s immense popularity. What roles did they play in the popularity of Shakespeare and theater? How did they effect the prestige of the plays or the theater as a whole?
4. The script had a huge role in the public’s enjoyment of a play, as time went on what caused a shift in the public’s perception of the play? How did the loss of understanding the words written come into effect?
5. Being able to see Shakespeare and the theater was easy and affordable in the early 1800s. What were the effects of the large number of shows and the low price? How did masculinity, class, and nationalism (and nativism) affect this emerging theater culture? According to Nigel Cliff, why had class tensions become sharper in New York by the late 1840s?
6. How did the B’Hoys help completely change how theaters were run? How did the privatization of theaters and consolidation of theater companies change how theaters were run? How did the riots help shift the Shakespearean theater from “popular” to *Culture*?

7. According to Nigel Cliff, what factors – personal, local, and international – led to the Astor Place Riot? When we study the context from which this riot emerged, why does a showdown between the “Upper 10” and the “b’hoys” taking place in a *theater* not seem as outlandish as it might appear to people reading about the Astor Place Riot today?
8. Shakespeare is now considered to be of a “higher” status and class. What has changed when you go and see Shakespeare today? How has it shifted in today’s culture? Will it always be “archaic and inaccessible” (pg 80)?