

NEW YORK CITY: PASSIONATE ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

Throughout the history of New York, New Yorkers have been passionate about Shakespeare. New Yorkers have wept and fainted, gone to jail, even fought and died over the Bard's works. This lesson incorporates video clips from the program [NY VOICES](#): "The Public" at 50, which explores the genesis and influence of Joseph Papp's Public Theater on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. In this lesson, you will learn about four events concerning the history of Shakespeare's plays as they have been experienced and performed in New York City. What is it about the Bard and his writing that causes people to have such love for his works? Do we still have the same passion for them today? The lesson emphasizes reading primary and secondary source materials, interpreting the emotions of the people involved in the historical events, and reading passages from Shakespeare that relate both historically and emotionally to the events. The culminating activity is a simulated Town Hall meeting in which students defend Shakespeare as part of American culture.

PREPARATION

Grade Level: Grades 9-12

Time Allotment:

5 fifty-minute class periods

Subject Matter: English, History, Theater and Performing Arts

Learning Objectives:

Students will learn about:

- The facts surrounding the Astor Place Riot and events surrounding performances of Shakespeare in American history.
- The centrality of Shakespearean performance in American society in the 1750s, 1820s, 1840s, and late 1950s.
- The universality of the themes of Shakespeare's works.

Students will be able to:

- Find connections between historical events and the arts that were popular at those times.
- Interpret primary and secondary source documents.
- Find arts information in online newspapers.
- Analyze Shakespearean texts.

Standards:

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):
www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm

Standard 1:

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

Standard 2:

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Standard 3:

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Standard 4:

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

Standard 5:

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 11:

Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Computer Resources:

- Modem: 56.6 Kbps or faster.
- Browser: Netscape Navigator 4.0 or above or Internet Explorer 4.0 or above. Macintosh computer: System 8.1 or above and at least 32 MB of RAM.
- Personal computer (Pentium II 350 MHz or Celeron 600 MHz) running Windows® 95 or higher and at least 32 MB of RAM
- [RealPlayer](#)
- Adobe Acrobat Reader 4.0 or higher. Download the free Adobe Acrobat reader here: <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>.

Materials:

Teachers will need the following supplies:

- Board and/or chart paper
- Ideally, a screen on which to project the Web-based video clips
- Handouts of resources if computers are not available in the classroom
- Video of [NEW YORK VOICES](#), "The Public" at 50, Episodes #520 and #521

Students will need the following supplies:

- Computers with the capacities indicated above
- Notebook or journal
- Pens/pencils
- Copies of the student handouts

Web and video resources:

Before teaching this lesson, bookmark all of the Web sites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom, create a word-processing document with all of the Web sites listed as hyperlinks, upload all links to an online bookmarking utility such as www.portaportal.com, or make paper handouts of necessary Web pages so that students can access the information on these sites. Make sure that your computer has necessary media players, like RealPlayer, to show streaming clips (if applicable).

Preview all of the sites and videos before presenting them to your class.

SHAKESPEARE

- In Search of Shakespeare on PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/>

This site contains many images and clips from Shakespeare's Plays as well as a biography of Shakespeare.

- The Complete Works of William Shakespeare

<http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html>

Students can find online copies of all Shakespeare plays on this site, offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

- Shakespeare in American Communities

<http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/>

A site full of information on Shakespeare and Shakespearean performance.

HALLAM & THE AMERICAN COMPANY (1750s)

- Early American Shakespeare Performances

<http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/history.html>

The NEA Shakespeare in American Communities site offers a history of Shakespearean performance in America and features a description of Hallam's American Company.

- The Douglas-Hallam Theater Excavation

http://research.history.org/Archaeological_Research/Research_Articles/ThemeVirginia/Hallam.cfm

Archaeologists from the foundation are currently excavating the remains of the last colonial theater in Williamsburg, Virginia, which housed The American Company.

THE AFRICAN COMPANY (1820s)

- Fine Arts Walk of Fame at Howard University

<http://www.howard.edu/collegefinearts/Theatre/walk.html>

Includes a description of The African Company.

- UNC Press Books

http://uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/mcallister_white.html

A synopsis of the book White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater by Marvin McAllister about The African Company.

- James Hewlett as “King Richard III” at the Richard the Third Society Web site

<http://www.r3.org/mckellen/img/africa1.gif>

A line drawing based on a painting of African-American actor James Hewlett in his signature role.

THE ASTOR PLACE RIOTS (1849)

- William Shakespeare in America

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/levine.html>

A chapter from *Highbrow/Lowbrow* by Lawrence Levine, in which he describes the Astor Place Riot in detail (about three-fourths of the way through the chapter).

- Library of Congress

John Bull & Uncle Sam: Popular Culture: from Baseball to Rock and Roll

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/british/brit-7.html>

Traces four centuries of British-American cultural relations with images from the Library’s collections.

JOSEPH PAPP & THE PUBLIC THEATER (1960s-present)

- The Public Theater

<http://www.publictheater.org/>

This is the main Web site for the New York *Shakespeare in the Park* Festival, produced by the Public Theater.

- National Public Radio / New York's Public Theater Marks 50 Years

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4807567>

Jeff Lunden reports on the history of the Public Theater. The site contains a clip of Kevin Kline as Hamlet.

- New York Times Theater Pages

<http://theater.nytimes.com/pages/theater/index.html>

The Web site for the Theater section of the American “paper of record.”

- Robert’s Rules of Order

www.robertsrules.org

Robert’s Rules can add structure to the Town Hall format.

This lesson was prepared by: Paul Michael Fontana

STEPS

Introductory Activities

Goal: To introduce the students to academic controversy.

1. Ask the students to respond to each of the questions on the [Preparatory Activity Sheet](#):

9 May 1849, *New York Herald*

To W. C. Macready, Esq.,

Dear Sir:—The undersigned, having heard that the outrage at the Astor Place Opera House, on Monday Evening, is likely to have the effect of preventing you from continuing your performances [of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*], and from concluding your intended farewell engagement on the American Stage, take this public method of requesting you to reconsider your decision, and of assuring you that the good sense and respect for order, prevailing in this community, will sustain you on the subsequent nights of your performances.

- From reading the letter, what do you think the “outrage at the Astor Place Opera House” was?
 - Do you think that W. C. Macready went on to perform *Macbeth* or did the “outrage” make him cut the tour short?
 - Are Literature and the Arts things people are willing to fight over? To die for? Why or why not?
 - What do you think of Shakespeare’s works? Are they part of American culture?
2. After the kids have finished writing their responses, play the online clip from the [New York Voices](#) “The Public” at 50 that talks about Joseph Papp’s confrontation with Robert Moses over *Shakespeare in the Park*. If you have a tape recording of the program, cue the tape to when you hear a man say “Joe was just fighting for his own very life...” and end the video at “...Joe totally identified with the theater.” After it plays, ask students to share their thoughts of the video segment. Ask if they feel it is important that all people have access to a production of Shakespeare?
 3. Discuss the students’ perceptions of Shakespeare as a part of American culture. Do they personally like Shakespeare? What plays have they seen live on stage? What plays have they read? Have they seen any film versions of Shakespeare’s plays, and if so, which ones? What about films whose stories were adapted from his plays (like “O”, “10 Things I Hate About You,” and “West Side Story”)?

Learning Activities:

Activity 1: Hallam & The American Company (1750s)

(One class period)

1. Explain that Shakespeare has been part of American culture almost since the first colonists arrived. Read this selection from the NEA's Shakespeare in American Communities Web site:

“The first recorded production in America of a play by Shakespeare took place in 1730 in New York City; it was an amateur *Romeo and Juliet*. Although Shakespeare's plays often figured into the [book] collections of early colonists, they did so only as literature... In 1751, the London Company of Comedians, under the direction of Lewis Hallam, landed in Virginia; the colonies' ban on the immigration of actors had recently been lifted. While crossing the Atlantic, Hallam and his troupe rehearsed on their ship's deck, so as to be ready to perform as soon as they reached the New World. In all likelihood, their first production was *The Merchant of Venice*, which played to mixed groups of settlers and Native Americans, and over the next ten years they added to their repertory *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*. They [moved to] New York in 1758.”

www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/history.html

- Brainstorm why British colonists in America would have enjoyed seeing Shakespeare on stage.
2. Give each student a copy of this speech from Act V, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*. In it, young husband Lorenzo tells his new wife Jessica about the “Music of the Spheres.” It was believed that the stars and planets (even “the smallest orb”) emitted pure musical tones as they moved (“in his motion like an angel sings “); these pure tones were audible to the pure of heart under the right conditions. He laments that the corrupt nature of our world and the mortality of the human body (“this muddy vesture of decay “) prevent us from hearing the sounds.

LORENZO

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

- How does this speech echo the feelings the British colonists might have had about their refined and distant homeland?
3. Ask each student to imagine that he or she is a British colonist in 1758 New York City. Each colonist will write a journal entry explaining how seeing Shakespeare made her/him more or less homesick for England. Collect and discuss the responses.
 4. How did Mr. Shakespeare fare during the latter half of the eighteenth century? After the ongoing success of Shakespearean performance in America, he fell out of favor because he was too British. Read or summarize the following passage to the class:

“Unfortunately for the Bard, revolutionary fervor increased toward the end of the century. When the Continental Congress met in 1774, its members passed a resolution discouraging all public amusements, especially those British in origin, and encouraged colonists instead to fight for independence. Two years later, the Sons of Liberty destroyed a New York playhouse that belonged to the American Company, a troupe that had recently taken up permanent residence there, the same troupe once called [Hallam’s] London Company of Comedians.”

<http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/history.html>

Activity 2: The African Company (1820s) (One class period)

1. Since George Washington was an avid theatergoer, Shakespeare was once again popular on American stages after the American Revolution, and both professional and amateur theater companies sprang up. One of the most controversial was The African Company. Here is a description of the African Company from Howard University’s Fine Arts Walk of Fame:

“The first professional Black Theatre group in America was the African Company. Their Theatre was the African Grove, located in lower Manhattan at Bleecker and Mercer Streets. It was founded during the season of 1820-1821 by a Mr. Brown, whose first name is not known. The African Company’s repertoire was primarily made up of Shakespearean dramas.

No one can mention the African Company without the names of James Hewlett, a West Indian Black, and Ira Aldridge, an American Black. They are considered the first and second Black tragedians, respectively.

The company performed for mixed audiences. Simon Snipe, in his book entitled, *Sports of New York* remarks, “...the audience was composed of white, black, copper, coloured and light brown.” The African Grove continued to have performances until late in 1823 when it closed after being wrecked by white hoodlums. “

<http://www.howard.edu/collegefinearts/Theatre/walk.html>

- Discuss what was controversial about the African Company. Traditionally, African-Americans in 1820s New York (both slave and free) could attend theatrical performances by White companies – if they sat in the rear of the balcony of the auditorium. It was unheard of for Blacks to perform plays for an audience including Whites (who, in the African Company performances were kept in the rear of the balcony). For the African Company to perform the Bard’s words was seen, by some, as an outrage!

According to historian Marvin McAllister, the African Company “dared to challenge Manhattan's Park Theatre. The Park was Manhattan's previously undisputed "major" theater and was managed by Stephen Price, a lawyer who became America's first noteworthy theatrical producer. Price would prove an important and debilitating rival for Brown's upstart African American theater.”

When the African Company was performing Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, Price arranged for Brown and the actors to be arrested for fire code violations, and eventually they were forbidden by law from performing Shakespeare again.

- What factors could have motivated Price to attack the African Company? As a businessman? As a theatrical purist? As a racist?
2. On the board, write the following excerpt from Act V, Scene 3 of *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, the African Company’s most famous Shakespearean production.

KING RICHARD III
 A thousand hearts are great within my bosom:
 Advance our standards*, set upon our foes *flags
 Our ancient word of courage, fair Saint George*, *patron of England
 Inspire us with the spleen of fiery dragons!
 Upon them victory sits...

- Discuss what your students imagine it might have meant for an audience of enslaved and free African-American men and women to hear James Hewlett as King Richard III say those lines.
 - Show the students the picture of Hewlett as King Richard III found at <http://www.r3.org/mckellen/img/africa1.gif>
3. Ask each student to imagine that he or she is an enslaved African-American in 1821 New York City who has just seen James Hewlett as King Richard III. In a letter to a friend, express what it meant to see a Black actor as a Shakespearean king. Collect and discuss the responses.

NOTE: What happened to the African Company after they were forbidden to perform Shakespeare? They began doing original plays:

The drama *King Shotaway*, based on *The Insurrection of the Carvas on the Island of St. Vincent*, was performed. Although the script is not extant, *King Shotaway* is probably the first play written and performed by Afro-Americans.

<http://www.howard.edu/collegefinearts/Theatre/walk.html>

Ira Aldridge, with his passion for playing Shakespeare, exiled himself to Europe where he starred for many years. James Hewlett, on the other hand, stayed in the United States and performed in Minstrel Shows reciting Shakespeare's speeches between the racist songs and clownish dances he was forced to perform.

Activity 3: The Astor Place Riot (1849)

(One class period)

1. Ask the class to think about what they know about immigration in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps some of them saw the recent film by Martin Scorsese, titled "Gangs of New York," which deals with the conflicts that arose between the Anglo-American establishment and Irish immigrants. It is against this backdrop that the Astor Place Riot took place. In his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, historian Lawrence Levine describes the events leading up to the Riot:

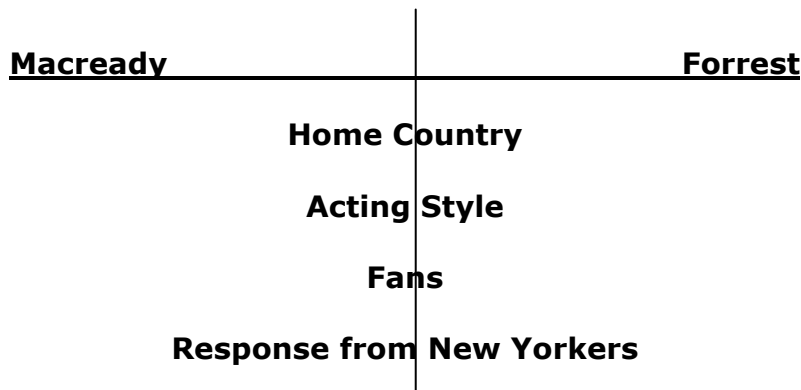
The full extent of class feeling and divisions existing in egalitarian America was revealed on a bloody Thursday in May 1849 at and around the Astor Place Opera House in New York City; The immediate catalyst was a long-standing feud between two leading actors, the Englishman William: Charles Macready and the American Edwin Forrest, who had become symbols of antithetical values.

Forrest's vigorous acting style, his militant love of his country, his outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility endeared him to the American people. Macready's cerebral acting style, his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry made him appear Forrest's diametric opposite.

On May 7, Macready and Forrest appeared against one another in separate productions of *Macbeth*. Forrest's performance, at the Broadway Theatre, was a triumph both dramatically and politically.... Macready's performance, at the Astor Place Opera House, was never heard – he was silenced by a storm of boos... and by an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and, ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery, which forced him to leave the stage in the third act.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/levine.html>

- Give each student a copy of the [handout](#) and ask them to read the description and fill out the chart below.



2. Give each student a copy of the following speech from Act I, scene 7 of *Macbeth*, the play that both Macready and Forrest were performing in New York. In the speech, Macbeth is contemplating killing King Duncan, who is his monarch and his cousin. Using lots of euphemisms for the killing of Duncan like “it”, “assassination,” and “blow,” Macbeth worries that somehow the violence will not stop (and be the “be-all and the end-all here”) but will haunt him (or “return to plague the inventor” and make him drink from his own “poisoned chalice”).

<p>MACBETH</p> <p>If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly: if the assassination Could trammel up the consequence, and catch With his surcease success; that but this blow Might be the be-all and the end-all here, But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases We still have judgment here; that we but teach Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice To our own lips.</p>

- Have the students read the excerpt to find what Macbeth says about the negative effects of violence.
3. Inform the students that Macready, when he tried to perform his British-style *Macbeth*, had been pelted with garbage (the “outrage at the Astor Place Opera House” mentioned below). On 9 May 1849, author Herman Melville, author Washington Irving and 47 other prominent New Yorkers published a petition, in the *New York Herald* urging Macready to continue his performances at the Astor Place Opera House:

9 May 1849, *New York Herald*

To W. C. Macready, Esq.,

Dear Sir:—The undersigned, having heard that the outrage at the Astor Place Opera House, on Monday Evening, is likely to have the effect of preventing you from continuing your performances [of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*], and from concluding your intended farewell engagement on the American Stage, take this public method of requesting you to reconsider your decision, and of assuring you that the good sense and respect for order, prevailing in this community, will sustain you on the subsequent nights of your performances.

The students should recognize this text from the Introductory Activity. Indeed, on May 10, 1849, William Charles Macready mounted the stage as Macbeth. Levine describes it thus:

Those outside—stirred by orators' shouts of "Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!" and... bombarded the theater with paving stones, attempted to storm the entrances, and were stopped only after detachments of militia fired point blank into the crowd. In the end at least twenty-two people were killed, and over one hundred and fifty were wounded or injured. [Historian] Richard Moody sets the number killed at thirty-one: twenty-two during the riot itself and nine more as a result of wounds received during the riot.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/levine.html>

4. Show the students the images of Forrest, Macready and the drawing of the Riot itself which are found at: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/british/brit-7.html>, the Web site for the Library of Congress exhibit "John Bull & Uncle Sam: Popular Culture: from Baseball to Rock and Roll," which traces British-American cultural relations.
5. Ask the students to write a short essay describing a modern arts-based event that might cause a disagreement leading to heightened emotions or acts of violence. Collect and discuss the responses.

Activity 4: Joseph Papp & the Public Theater (1960s-present)

(One class period)

1. The Astor Place Riot led to an emotional division between "high" art and "low" art. By the 1950s, Shakespeare in America had become stratified within the world of academia: his plays were taught, just not enjoyed very much. Discuss with the students whether there is a division between "high" art and "popular" art today? List on the board some examples that the students suggest. In which category is Shakespeare's work?
2. Write the following questions on the board:
 - List three elements of Joseph Papp's life that, according to Lunden, made him an unlikely candidate to head a Shakespeare festival.
 - How did Papp's idea of how Shakespeare should be performed differ from what was being done?

- How did The Public Theater begin?
 - What is multi-racial, multi-ethnic casting?
3. Now, play the second New York Voices online clip about how Joseph Papp’s background influenced the casting procedures of the Public Theater for your students. If you are using the program on video, cue it to when you hear “Well, that came out of his own background ...” and stop the tape after “...but that was always there. It never changed.” Afterwards, ask them to respond to it and relate what was said in the video clip to the questions on the board.
 4. Next, play the 11-minute streaming audio from National Public Radio of Jeff Lunden’s report on the history of the Public Theater (New York’s Public Theater Marks 50 Years) for your students at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4807567. Then discuss their responses to the aforementioned questions.
 5. Play the two-minute streaming video from *Hamlet* with Kevin Kline (Act V, scene 1) called “Alas, Poor Yorick” located in the above mentioned Web site. Give each of your students a copy of the text below. In this iconic scene, Hamlet is confronted with the skull of Yorick, jester to Hamlet’s father (the dead king). As a boy, Hamlet loved Yorick. Hamlet is in awe that someone as lively as Yorick could be so dead. It leads him to think about the mortality of all of mankind. For example, the prettiest girl (“my lady”) will die (“to this favour she must come”).

HAMLET

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that.

- Ask the students, what are the problems that Hamlet is confronting in this speech that people still confront today?
6. Ask the students to write a paraphrase of the speech in modern vernacular, stressing the themes of mortality and decay. They may choose to follow Shakespeare’s mood of the futility of life or they may wish to take a more positive tone. When the students are finished writing, discuss and collect their paraphrases.

Culminating Activity/Assessment:

1. As a final assessment, the class will simulate a town hall meeting in which citizens are battling to continue funding to keep Shakespeare in the Park free of charge. The fictional mayor has completely cut funding, stating that Shakespeare (and theater in general) is not relevant to today’s world. The teacher will be in role as the moderator for the meeting. If you

choose to, you can formalize the Town Hall Format by introducing elements of Robert's Rules of Order (found at <http://www.robertsrules.org>).

2. Show the last video clip in which two regular *Shakespeare in the Park* attendees rave about the experience. If you have a copy of the tape, start the video when you hear a woman say "Well, today I got here at 6:40 ..." and end at "... I really look forward to it." Then, divide the class into four groups. Each group will be an expert in one of the four events covered in this lesson (Hallam, The African Company, The Astor Place Riots, and Joseph Papp). Each group will be given time to prepare their statement on what role Shakespeare's works played in the event they are representing.
3. After calling the meeting to order, the teacher will lead a discussion of the relevance and universality of Shakespeare, keeping the discussion positive and lively. The teacher-as-moderator should ask questions of each group and use her/his authority to keep order in the meeting. The teacher should specifically try to draw out how Shakespeare had a specific relevance to the social upheavals that were taking place (1750s = colonial anxiety, 1820s = legally, the end of slavery in New York, 1840s = social unrest among immigrants, 1960s = the social revolution).
4. After all the groups have made their case, ask students to draft a letter to the mayor, explaining the NEED for theater, and Shakespeare specifically, in American culture. Before they draft the letter, have them watch this clip in which people talk about how The Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park performances has affected their lives.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Cross-Curricular Extensions:

- Art: send students to the PBS "[In Search of Shakespeare](http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/works/)" Web site at <http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/works/>, and have them look at several posters from Shakespeare's plays. They can evaluate which are most effective and create one for a play by Shakespeare that they have read.
- Current Events: Look at the theater listings in the online version of *The New York Times* (<http://theater.nytimes.com/pages/theater/index.html>) and see how many Shakespeare or Shakespeare-related performances there are (like Broadway's *All Shook Up*, which is based on *Twelfth Night*). Ask students to consider these questions: How have the performances been adapted to fit the tastes of modern audiences? Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not? Have students write a response paper that they will hand in.

Community Connections:

- "[The Hobart Shakespeareans](#)" is an inspirational documentary by Mel Stuart, which recently premiered on Thirteen/WNET New York (please check your local PBS stations for rebroadcast dates). According to the filmmaker, it is "a documentary about an extraordinary teacher, Rafe Esquith, who teaches at one of the largest inner-city elementary schools in the United States, in Los Angeles. The students are nine- and ten-

year-old Korean and Mexican immigrant children. Their parents don't speak English and Rafe Esquith puts them through a rigorous year of study, the highlight of which is a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*." View a trailer of this amazing documentary by visiting "The Hobart Shakespearians" Web site at <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2005/hobart/index.html>. After reading the Mel Stuart quote to your students or viewing the trailer with them (or both), ask the students to compare the students in Rafe Esquith's class to the audiences from Hallam's Company, the African Company actors, the Astor Place fans, and the Public Theater's early audiences. Imagine why the plays are important to these students. How are the young actors of "The Hobart Shakespearians," all of immigrant families, empowered by performing in a production of Shakespeare's plays? What sense of accomplishment do they get from doing it?

- Do your students want to feel empowered by trying a speech or a scene? Use the MIT site (<http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html>) for texts or contact The English Speaking Union about its annual National Shakespeare Competition (http://www.english-speakingunion.org/programs_shakespeare_competition.htm).
- Encourage your students to read and attend more Shakespeare performances, and post fliers for local performances of his works in your classroom.

STUDENT ORGANIZERS

Print out and make copies of these organizers for your students:

- Student Handout 1 -- Pre-Reading Questions
- Student Handout 2 -- Merchant of Venice Speech
- Student Handout 3 -- Astor Place Riot
- Student Handout 4 -- Macbeth Speech
- Student Handout 5 -- Hamlet Speech

PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

Name _____

9 May 1849, *New York Herald*

To W. C. Macready, Esq.,

Dear Sir:—The undersigned, having heard that the outrage at the Astor Place Opera House, on Monday Evening, is likely to have the effect of preventing you from continuing your performances [of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*], and from concluding your intended farewell engagement on the American Stage, take this public method of requesting you to reconsider your decision, and of assuring you that the good sense and respect for order, prevailing in this community, will sustain you on the subsequent nights of your performances.

From reading the letter, what do you think the “outrage at the Astor Place Opera House” was?

Do you think that W. C. Macready went on to perform *Macbeth* or did the “outrage” make him cut the tour short?

Are Literature and the Arts things people are willing to fight over? To die for? Why or why not?

What do you think of Shakespeare's works? Are they part of American Culture?

MERCHANT OF VENICE SPEECH – ACTIVITY 1

LORENZO

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

The Merchant of Venice
William Shakespeare
Act 5, Scene 1

ASTOR PLACE RIOT - ACTIVITY 3

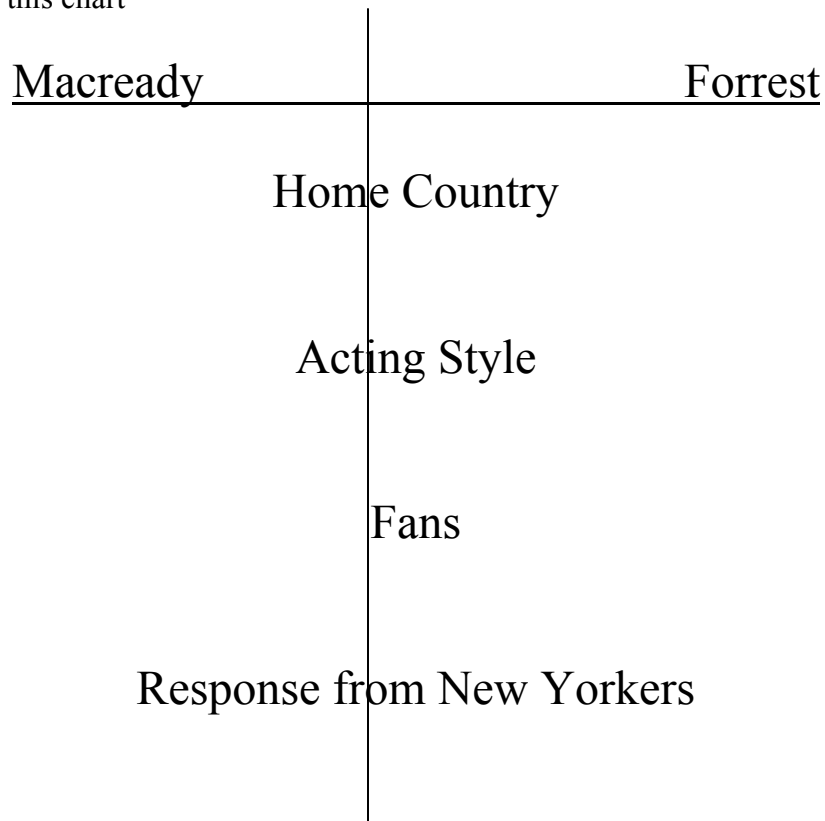
The full extent of class feeling and divisions existing in egalitarian America was revealed on a bloody Thursday in May 1849 at and around the Astor Place Opera House in New York City; The immediate catalyst was a long-standing feud between two leading actors, the Englishman William: Charles Macready and the American Edwin Forrest, who had become symbols of antithetical values.

Forrest's vigorous acting style, his militant love of his country, his outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility endeared him to the American people. Macready's cerebral acting style, his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry made him appear Forrest's diametric opposite.

On May 7, Macready and Forrest appeared against one another in separate productions of Macbeth. Forrest's performance, at the Broadway Theatre, was a triumph both dramatically and politically.... Macready's performance, at the Astor Place Opera House, was never heard – he was silenced by a storm of boos... and by an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and, ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery, which forced him to leave the stage in the third act.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/levine.html>

Please complete this chart



MACBETH SPEECH – ACTIVITY 3

MACBETH

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.

Macbeth
William Shakespeare
Act 1, scene 7

Make a list below of what Macbeth says in the excerpt about the negative effects of violence.

HAMLET SPEECH - ACTIVITY 4

HAMLET

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that.

Notes:

infinite jest = unlimited jokes

borne = carried

abhorred = hated

my gorge rises = I want to throw up

I know not how oft = I can't count how many times

gibes = jokes

gambols = silly dances

paint an inch thick = put on lots of make-up

this favour she must come = she will someday look like this skull

What problems is Hamlet is confronting in this speech that people still confront today?