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The First of the Modern Directors: The Actor-Manager Career of William Charles Macready

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Chapter VI – The First of the Modern Directors
Conclusion to
The Actor-Manager Career of William Charles Macready

By Abe (Abraham) J. Bassett, Ph.D.

Introduction

“My ambition,” wrote William Charles Macready on retiring from the stage in February 1851, was “to establish a theatre, in regard to decorum and taste, worthy of our country, and to have in it the plays of our divine Shakespeare fitfully illustrated.” Although this was undoubtedly a life-long aspiration, which spanned over forty years of his professional career it was best expressed in the four theatrical seasons in which Macready managed Covent Garden theatre (from 1837 to 1839) and Drury Lane theatre (from 1841 to 1843.) It has been the purpose of this study to examine the contributions that Macready made to the theatre through a detailed study of each of the four seasons mentioned above.

The contributions of Macready to the theatre will be examined in the remaining portion of this chapter with reference to the following: first, Macready’s success as an actor-manager; second, his revivification of Shakespeare; third, his contributions to staging a production; and fourth his effects on the patent theatres and later actor-managers.

Macready’s Success an Actor-Manager

The degree to which Macready succeeded as an actor-manager may be ascertained by examining the financial accounts of each season, as well as the plays produced, and the reactions from press, public and members of Macready’s acting companies.

By collating the information respecting comparative seasonal incomes, which he revealed in his final Drury Lane address, together with the known income of the Drury Lane seasons it is possible to compute the financial income of each of Macready’s four seasons as manager. The result is shown in Table 27 below. With respect to the nightly income, an upward trend is noted for the first three seasons. Had this trend continued for the last season, Macready would have undoubtedly shown a profit for the final season. As it is, only one of the four seasons was financially profitable, the Covent Garden 1838-1839 season in which over £41,000 was received at the box office. Altogether nearly £130,000 was taken in during the four seasons—a nightly average of £179. Because the nightly expenses are not known, it is not possible to compute the exact profit and loss. However to have had one profitable season, at this late date in the history of the patent system, was in itself a significant accomplishment.

TABLE 27
FINANCIAL RECORD OF MACREADY'S MANAGEMENT

| Theatre | Year | Number of Nights | Nightly Average | Seasonal Income | Rent Paid |
|---------------|---------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Covent Garden | 1837-38 | 212 | £154 | £32,648 | £5500 |
| Covent Garden | 1838-39 | 222 | £188 | £41,736 | £7000 |
| Drury Lane | 1841-42 | 116 | £195 | £22,701 | (?) |
| Drury Lane | 1842-43 | 183 | £175 | £32,012 | (?) |

Part of the financial failure of the three seasons, especially that of the last season, can be attributed to the inability of Macready to find attractive plays by contemporary playwrights. As seen in Table 28, the average run, and percentage of season devoted to the non-Shakespearian plays declined steadily throughout the four years. However, Macready came to rely more heavily on the production of Shakespearian plays and in the second season at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane over fifty percent of the nights were devoted to Shakespeare. With the exception of the 1842-1843 season—which Macready referred to as a period of “depressed times and increased taxation”—the upward trend of average nightly income meant that more people were being attracted to the theatre, and indirectly that Macready’s system of management was being accepted.

The strongest criterion for judging Macready’s success as an actor-manager, however, comes from the reactions expressed in the press, by the public, and by the actions of Macready’s acting companies. The press, although they subjected Macready to censure from time to time for specific details of management, were always united in his behalf before the season opened and after it closed. Satisfaction that Macready had become a manager, and regret that he had surrendered his charge, was commonly heard. Although Macready was not always popular, he was seldom if ever condemned once the season was over. In explaining the reasons for Macready’s quitting theatre management, the critics always turned to reasons external to Macready. The public, through testimonial dinners for Macready, and through their demonstrations at the theatre at various times, revealed that they approved of his efforts as actor-manager. The highest statement of approval, however, came from the many actors who comprised Macready’s acting companies at Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres. The actors, from time to time expressed approbation individually and as a group. More than once many of these actors expressed willingness to be a member of Macready’s acting company, even though it meant a one-third cut in their salaries. This act clearly demonstrates the actor’s approval of Macready’s system of management.

TABLE 28
GRAND SUMMARY OF PLAYS PRESENTED DURING FOUR SEASONS

| | Covent Garden 1837-1838 | Covent Garden 1838-1839 | Drury Lane 1841-1842 | Drury Lane 1842-1843 | Grand Total |
|--------------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Total Main Plays | 37 | 29 | 16 | 34 | 116 |
| Average run | 5.7 | 7.6 | 7.2 | 5.3 | 6.3 |
| Total Performances | 212 | 222 | 116 | 183 | 733 |
| Plays of Shakespeare | | | | | |
| Number of Plays | 11 | 11 | 5 | 9 | 36 |
| Average run | 5 | 10.5 | 8.4 | 10.5 | 8.5 |
| Total Performances | 55 | 115 | 44 | 95 | 309 |
| Percentage of season* | 26% | 51.8% | 36.2% | 52.5% | 42.7% |
| Nightly Average Income | | | £233 | £194 | |
| Percentage of season^ | | | 41.3% | 57.8% | |
| Non-Shakespearian Plays | | | | | |
| Number of Plays | 20 | 15 | 9 | 19 | 63 |
| Average run | 5.7 | 5.6 | 3.9 | 3 | 4.8 |
| Total Performances | 115 | 85 | 44 | 57 | 301 |
| Percentage of season* | 54.2% | 38.2% | 37.9% | 31.5% | 41.2% |
| Nightly Average Income | | | £163 | £151 | |
| Percentage of season^ | | | 30.2% | 26.9% | |
| Operas and Musicals | | | | | |
| Number of Plays | 6 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 17 |
| Average run | 7 | 7.3 | 15 | 4.8 | 12.5 |
| Total Performances | 42 | 22 | 31 | 29 | 124 |
| Percentage of season* | 20% | 9.9% | 25.9% | 16% | 17.1% |
| Nightly Average Income | | | £226 | £167 | |
| Percentage of season^ | | | 28.5% | 14.7% | |
| *Percent total performances | | | | | |
| ^Percent seasonal gross income | | | | | |

Revivification of Shakespeare

When Macready announced in his playbills that the play would be “from the text of Shakespeare,” it came to mean that he had restored the original text, and extirpated the adulterations and interpolations that had beset Shakespeare, in some cases, for one hundred fifty years. In Macready’s four seasons, seventeen of Shakespeare’s plays, as seen in Table 29, had been produced. These plays had been purged of all additions, which the improvers of Shakespeare had made. In *King Lear*, for example, the interpolated love scenes were banished and the Fool restored. By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, only three of Shakespeare’s plays—*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Richard III*—were yet to be restored. Macready performed *Catherine and Petruchio*, by Garrick, and had restored *Romeo and Juliet* but did not produce this play in its restored version.

TABLE 29
SUMMARY OF SHAKESPERIAN PLAYS

| Play | Covent Garden 1837-38 | Covent Garden 1838-39 | Drury Lane 1841-42 | Drury Lane 1842-43 | Total |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------|
| The Tempest | -- | 55 | -- | -- | 55 |
| Macbeth | 17 | 5 | 8 | 10 | 40 |
| As You Like It | 1 | 4 | -- | 10 | 44 |
| King John | -- | -- | -- | 26 | 26 |
| Othello | 3 | 8 | 1 | 11 | 23 |
| King Henry V | 2 | 21 | -- | -- | 23 |
| Hamlet | 3 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 18 |
| King Lear | 10 | 6 | -- | -- | 16 |
| Merchant of Venice | -- | -- | 15 | -- | 15 |
| Two Gentlemen of Verona | -- | -- | 14 | -- | 14 |
| Coriolanus | 8 | 3 | -- | -- | 11 |
| Much Ado About Nothing | -- | -- | -- | 11 | 11 |
| The Winter’s Tale | 4 | 4 | -- | 2 | 10 |
| Cymbeline | -- | 3 | -- | 4 | 7 |
| Julius Caesar | 2 | 1 | -- | 3 | 6 |
| Henry VIII | 2 | -- | -- | -- | 2 |
| Romeo and Juliet | 2 | -- | -- | -- | 2 |
| Nights of Shakespeare | 54 | 115 | 42 | 83 | 294 |
| Plays of Shakespeare | 11 | 11 | 5 | 9 | 17 |

However, through not only text restoration, but also by the careful production of Shakespeare's plays, Macready established the Elizabethan writer on the stage. As Macready expressed it, in 1851,

We have assurance that the corrupt editions and unworthy presentations of past days will never be restored, but that the purity of our great poet's text will from henceforward be held on our English stage in the reverence it ever shall command.

Macready firmly established the fact that Shakespeare will not only attract audiences to the theatre, but that the production of Shakespearian plays can be more lucrative than any other type of play. In both seasons at Drury Lane as seen in Table 28, the greatest income resulted from the production of Shakespeare.

Macready's Contributions to Staging and Production

Macready's contributions to the staging and production of plays during his four years as actor-manager may be discussed with reference to the following five specialized headings: first, furthering the trend toward historical accuracy; second, emphasis on ensemble acting; third, emphasis on unity of production; fourth, stress on the importance of adequate rehearsals; and fifth, on innovations in staging.

Macready's first important contribution to staging was the furthering of the trend toward historical accuracy. The usual practice in staging, prior to Macready's term as actor-manager, was to stage a play with little regard to the actual location or time in which the play was written. The attempts to clothe and set a play in its true historical setting were sporadic and often inaccurate. Macready attempted to be both consistent and accurate in setting and costuming his plays. He conducted research and consulted authorities in order that he might give to the play a setting, which had both "fidelity and appropriateness." In this respect he was successful. The ultimate compliment is paid to this aspect of Macready's managerial system, when the critics remark that it is as if they had been transported to bygone eras. Macready was not, however, an antiquarian. His striving for historical accuracy was simply a means to the end result of rendering the author's meaning more clear.

A second important contribution to the *mise en scene* derives from Macready's emphasis on ensemble acting. To achieve the unique ensemble effect for which he became well known, Macready had to do three things: first, he had to abolish the star system; second establish the importance of all actors contributing to the action on the stage; and third, drill all the actors to be part of the action at all times. The star system was abolished, and Macready himself took minor roles such as Harmony, Valentine, and Friar Laurence to emphasize the importance of subordinating personal feelings to the importance of the role. Throughout the four seasons of Macready's tenure, beginning with *The Winter's Tale* in the fall of 1837 and extending to the production of *Sappho* in the spring of 1843, Macready's productions were noted for the manner in which the actors performed on stage. Each actor was expected to contribute his proportionate share to the action on stage and to react to the actions of others. The supers were drilled to act as if the success of the

play depended on them alone; they reacted according to many reviews, as if they were really the characters they were representing. Often the critics reacted to the “animated crowds on stage” as if they had never before witnessed such activity in a theatre.

Another contribution that Macready made to the *mise en scene* was the emphasis which he placed on the unity of production. In many productions the critics pointed out that there was in Macready’s plays, one over-all concept, and that the various elements of the production fit together in a harmonizing manner. The critics criticized several of Macready’s Covent Garden productions because there seemed to be a show of spectacle to the detriment of the play’s conceptions. The criticism did not tend, however, to be repeated during the two seasons at Drury Lane. Rather, these latter productions are said to be a blending of all elements into a meaningful, united whole. Moreover, unlike Elliston’s Drury Lane, where each actor was encouraged to read his part according to his own conception of it, Macready insisted on giving to the actors one general interpretation.

Another contribution to *the mise en scene* was Macready’s emphasis on rehearsing a play for much longer periods of time than was the custom. Macready began a two or three week rehearsal period by reading the play to the company. The rehearsals were evidently long and grueling; Macready often related how he “rehearsed with care” a certain play. Rehearsals were no mere reading of lines; rather they were intensive work periods in which the actors were expected to perfect their parts.

Finally, Macready may be seen as something of an innovator in staging. He was the first to use the limelight in a theatre and among the first to employ a moving diorama in Covent Garden. He was the first to use a moving diorama in a legitimate play, and certainly the first to do so in a Shakespearian play. Under his management at Drury Lane, a new sea-wave machine was introduced and there is the possibility that a box set was employed for one of his productions in 1842 which would be among the earlier uses of that staging technique.

Macready and the Patent Theatre

When Macready first began his career as actor-manager at Covent Garden in 1837, the traditional patent monopoly was in full force. Macready was the last actor-manager to attempt to maintain the traditions and functions of the patent theatre as it was originally conceived. In 1843, when having tried for four years to operate under the limitations of the system, Macready retired as actor-manager. Artistically, he had not failed as actor-manager, but he had not been able to operate financially under the many deficiencies of the system. In his concluding address Macready’s criticisms of the patent monopolies helped set a chain reaction which ended in late 1843 with the abolition of the law which had first established the patents.

Macready, in taking over Covent Garden in 1837 attempted to check the declining state of the patent theatres by sweeping away the abuses, which had crept

into the system. The first and most notable of the abuses, which tended to degrade the theatre as a serious arena of theatrical entertainment was the practice of allowing, and even encouraging prostitutes to carry out their solicitations in the theatre. In this respect, Macready was successful in abolishing the evil, and was applauded for his efforts. Although the effects of the banishment of “women of the town” were not immediately felt, it did help in raising the public estimation of the theatre. Secondly, Macready had promised, in 1837, to publish playbills which stated only the essential facts of a production, and did not allow puffery and exaggeration to mar the bill. To this promise he rigidly adhered, and the playbills, which were once termed the “derision of the intelligent and the delusion of the ignorant” were no longer printed. Two other innovations at Drury Lane served, in part, to raise the public’s estimation of the theatre. The first was the installation of stalls in the pit, and the second was the numbering of all seats in the house. These minor reforms meant that those who attended the theatre in the pit were assured of more privacy than they would have normally enjoyed, and according to one observer, resulted in the appearance of more ladies in that section of the house, and therefore, greater respectability in the audience. The number of seats may have also achieved a similar effect by assuring each ticket holder that he had a place in the theatre. Generally speaking, then, Macready attempted to make the theatre a place where decent people could feel free to attend without embarrassment.

However, if Macready attempted to sustain the traditional function of the patents during his first seasons, he also helped bring about its fall during his latter seasons. The public and press obviously felt that Macready was the one man in London who had the necessary qualifications to be a manager. He was respected for his professional abilities, his personal integrity and his high standards of taste. The press and the public felt that only Macready could save the theatres, even though some people did not like him

When, in 1843 Macready found that he could not survive the patent theatre, he resigned. In his final speech, he imparted blame not to the public or playwrights nor to the state of the theatre in general, but to the monopoly system itself. “May I now ask,” said Macready, “for what public benefit such a law is framed or for what one good purpose is it persisted in? . . . It is the law [I] condemn as the drama’s worst enemy.” The press and presumably the public took up the challenge. Although Macready cannot be given full credit for the abolition of the monopoly system, he precipitated the last effort; he was a catalytic agent. The repeal of the monopoly system had, perhaps, only one immediate effect. It opened the doors of the minor theatres to the legitimate drama and to actor-managers who could carry on Macready’s reforms. Samuel Phelps, who was to be later recognized as one of Macready’s disciples became manager of Sadler’s Wells theatre in 1844, where he remained for nearly two decades. At this theatre he established a reputation for the production of Shakespearian plays. Following Phelps into a minor theatre was Charles Kean, who in 1851 became manager of the Princess’s theatre. Phelps and

Kean carried on the Macready system, copying from it sometimes, and improving on it other times.

The following contemporary reaction from *The Times* of February 4, 1851, may with some profit, be recorded.

If Mr. Macready's managerial labours were not adequately remunerated as far as he himself was concerned, his object in reviving a taste of Shakespeare, when appropriately decorated, was accomplished. That the fashionable world is recalled to the patronage of the literary drama cannot be maintained; but a demand for a higher sort of work than those, which satisfied their immediate predecessors, has sprung up among the middle and lower classes. Sadler's Wells, once the most vulgar of theatres in the metropolis, is a striking instance in this respect. A few years ago dramas of a worthlessness, how scarcely conceivable, were relished by a public with whom at present anything but the 'legitimate' is found unendurable. Dramatic free trade by destroying the monopoly of the patents, is indeed, an important cause of the change but it must, as the same time, be observed, that in all the new establishments where Shakespeare has been produced with success the principle of Mr. Macready has been adopted, and that wherever this principle has been departed from the plays of the best authors have had a dingy and unsatisfactory aspect. The highest praise that can be awarded to Mr. Kean and to Mr. Phelps, for the excellent spirit which distinguishes the productions at their two several establishments, is, that in their managerial capacity they have worthily followed in the path designated by Mr. Macready.

If a final judgment is to be made about William Charles Macready, actor-manager, it is that he was the first of the modern directors. His concept of the unified production of the play is assiduously followed today as the first requirement of stage production.