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Author

Wirtschafter, Eli Schon

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STREET THEATER AT ASTOR PLACE

The Silk Stocking Regiment and the Politics of Public Performance

By Eli Wirtschafter

On May 7, 1849, hundreds of working class rowdies packed the gallery of New York's aristocratic Astor Place Opera House. The attraction that evening was William Charles Macready, then England's most respected tragic actor, in the role of Macbeth. When he stepped onstage, the "gods" in the gallery jeered and pelted him with rotten food, successfully booing him off the stage. They were fans of the American actor Edwin Forrest, who starred in a rival production of *Macbeth* in New York that same night. Historian Lawrence Levine called the ensuing contest between Forrest's supporters and the aristocratic defenders of Macready "a struggle for power and cultural authority within theatrical space."¹ Three nights later, the conflict brought thousands into the street. The militia was summoned, and they fired into the crowd, killing twenty-two people.

My name is Eli Wirtschafter, and I am a major in both American Studies and Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies. My thesis will examine the Astor Place riot as a clash between performances that extended beyond the theater. I will describe the assembled crowd and the militia as performers competing for representation in public space.

This paper will focus on the Seventh Regiment New York Militia, the chief unit sent to put down the riot at Astor Place. First, I will review their history as an elite social club and parading unit that exerted control

1 Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 68.

over New York's streets. Next, I will describe their actions at Astor Place, showing how they were intended to communicate power. Finally, I will show how their performance influenced their reception in future public performances.

I began my research in archival libraries in New York, Washington DC, and London. This gave me a chance to immerse myself in the artifacts of a time when theater was popular entertainment on both sides of the Atlantic. The substance of this paper relies on newspaper reports, court testimonies, histories of the Seventh Regiment by its veterans, and an assortment of scholarly work on the Astor Place riot, on the militia, and on public performance in the nineteenth century.

For the purposes of this paper, I understand performance as a means of communication encompassing visual display, aural production, language, and even physical contact.² Performances are not just literal actions; they convey meaning to spectators. Essential to my reading is the notion of *representation*. Public performance always has a political dimension because it necessarily involves the representation of certain social groups at the expense of others. Performance in public space signifies, and is enabled by, the power of those represented.

Performance in the antebellum city was not confined to the theaters; parades, assemblies, marches, and festivals were central to civic life. Susan Davis writes about this kind of "street theater" as "a popular mode of communication" used to build, maintain, or confront relations of power.³ Street performances served "as political actions, rhetorical means by which performers attempted to accomplish practical and symbolic goals."⁴ When a regiment marched or an assembly gathered, participants asserted their right to display themselves in that place and in such a manner. Rioters and the suppressors of riots must be understood as acting within this sphere of politically-charged street performance.

This paper will specifically discuss the militia, and their role as public performers. The landscape of urban street theater was dominated by militia parades. According to Davis, these frequent, bombastic performances "constructed the conventions of respectable street drama."⁵ Additionally, military parades were often in direct competition with

2 Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

3 Susan G Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 3, 6.

4 Davis, *Parades and Power*, 5.

5 Davis, *Parades and Power*, 49

one another, especially when they represented different demographics. It follows that the militia held a stake in the Astor Place riot, not only as upper-class citizens, but also as performers commanding the public stage. The Astor Place riot began with a question of representation in the theater—whether working-class audiences could prevent the performance of an actor perceived to insult national pride—but the riot became a struggle for representation in the street. Before continuing, I will return to the conflict in the theaters and follow its trajectory up to the calling of the militia.

Goaded by social and commercial elites of the city, Macready (the English actor) decided to resume his engagement at the Opera House. His opponents distributed inflammatory broadsides reading, “WORKING MEN—SHALL AMERICANS OR THE ENGLISH RULE! IN THIS CITY?”⁶ That night, the managers of the theater forbade entry to anyone who looked like a troublemaker. A crowd estimated between ten and twenty thousand people gathered in the wide intersection outside the Opera House. A contingent, said to be mainly boys and young men, threw stones and bricks, hitting the theater and also the police force stationed outside. Unable to hold back the crowd, the police chief called in the state’s Seventh Regiment militia, who had been prepared as a backup force.⁷ They marched up Broadway in full uniform, armed with muskets.

The meaning of the Seventh Regiment’s⁸ performance at Astor Place must be understood in the context of the unit’s social, ceremonial, and repressive functions.

The Regiment was uniquely positioned to make a dramatic appearance on behalf of New York’s elite. The antebellum voluntary militias were exclusive by nature, accessible only to those with the free time to participate and the means to pay for membership and their own weapons and uniform.⁹ The Seventh Regiment was the most exclusive

6 American Committee, “Working Men, Shall Americans or English Rule! in This City? New York, 1849”, 1849, Folger Digital Image Collection.

7 Peter G. Buckley, “To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860” (New York: SUNY at Stony Brook, 1984), 74.

8 First Division, Seventh Regiment. The same company was designated as the Twenty-Seventh Regiment before 1846.

9 John K Mahon, *History of the militia and the National Guard* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 83.

and prestigious militia in New York, if not the country.¹⁰ Its officers came from the ranks of wealthy merchants, Wall Street brokers, and successful businessmen.¹¹ The newspapers called them “Silk Stocking Soldiers,” an epithet that poked fun at their privileged backgrounds.¹² And while some militias represented Irish or German immigrants, the Seventh was an association of the Anglo-Saxon elite.¹³

Much of the time, the Seventh functioned as a social club. Members drilled, ate, drank, and celebrated together.¹⁴ One veteran fondly recalled festive expeditions to Camp Clinton and Mount Vernon, lavish feasts sponsored by the city, target excursions, and “a general spirit of joyous activity.”¹⁵

For those outside the Seventh’s inner circle, the regiment could frequently be seen on parade. They paraded on civic occasions and holidays. They paraded for visiting dignitaries, including three presidents and the Prince of Wales.¹⁶ President Buchanan himself praised “the military precision of your march... and the stout, hardy, noble, and defiant look which you exhibited.”¹⁷ George Batcheller, New York’s inspector-general, declared in 1867 that parades advanced “the idea of national grandeur” and inspired “the peaceful sentiment of respect and obedience.”¹⁸

The regiment’s other public function was to suppress riots, which I argue should be understood along with parades as a performance of elite authority. Jacqueline Shine has observed that the Seventh “figured prominently in struggles over social space and political order,” suppressing virtually every riot in New York in the mid-nineteenth century—at least

10 Robert M. Fogelson, *America’s Armories: Architecture, Society, and Public Order* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 129.

11 Hudson G. Wolfe, *Chronological History of the Seventh Regiment, National Guard* (New York, 1858), 269-282.

12 Stephen L. Harris, *Duty, Honor, Privilege: New York’s Silk Stocking Regiment and the Breaking of the Hindenburg Line* (Potomac Books, Incorporated, 2005), 15.

13 Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 72.

14 Fogelson, *America’s Armories*, 6.

15 William Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment, National Guard, State of New York, During the War of the Rebellion: With a Preliminary Chapter on the Origin and Early History of the Regiment, a Summary of Its History Since the War, and a Roll of Honor, Comprising Brief Sketches of the Services Rendered by Members of the Regiment in the Army and Navy of the United States* (Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870), 9-18.

16 Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment*, 19.

17 Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment*, 19.

18 in Fogelson, *America’s Armories*, 7.

eight from 1834 to 1864.¹⁹ Prior to the Astor Place riot, New York militia had never fired on the people, and on several occasions their appearance alone exerted enough authority to disperse a crowd.

For example, in 1836 the Seventh and other regiments assembled in response to a labor strike. Reportedly, “the formidable military display had the desired effect,” ending the disturbance and sending the dockworkers back to their jobs the next day.²⁰ Again in 1857, the regiment broke up a riot just by parading to the site of the brawl.²¹ A veteran wrote, “the supremacy of the law [was] thus asserted and re-established, solely through the influence of its prestige, and ‘the power of its great name.’”²²

When the Regiment sought private funds for the construction of a palatial new armory in 1876, they made no secret of the link between the unit’s exclusive membership and its effective riot control. The Seventh reminded potential donors that “its officers and members... represent the friends of law and order and that part of the community which has large financial interests that are often imperiled by the riotous and disorderly.”²³

When the Seventh Regiment arrived at Astor Place, on May 10, 1849, it was reasonable to expect an outcome as in previous disturbances — no loss of life, a parade of power being sufficient to disburse the crowd. But their performance was disrupted, and the militia pursued increasingly drastic means to communicate their authority. Even when they fired their weapons, the intent was not to kill specific individuals in the crowd, but to signify their dominance over public space.

The Seventh Regiment first tried to disburse the riot with a parade-like performance. Writing in 1873, Joel Headley described their appearance in the terms of a parade: “at length, a regiment of the National Guard... was seen marching steadily up Broadway. The crowd parted as it advanced, and as it turned into Eighth Street, the sharp word of command,

19 Jacqueline Shine, “‘Open to the People for Their Free Assembly’: Tompkins Square Park, 1850–1880,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 1 (2011): 108–124. Fogelson, *America’s Armories*, 8.

20 Emmons Clark, *History of the Second Company of the Seventh Regiment (National Guard) N. Y. S. Militia* (J. G. Gregory, 1864), 128.

21 Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 153.

22 Asher Taylor and John Mason, *Recollections of the Early Days of the National Guard: Comprising the Prominent Events in the History of the Famous Seventh Regiment New York Militia* (J. M. Bradstreet & Son, 1868), 188.

23 General Committee on New Armory, Seventh Regiment Armory, “To the Citizens and Taxpayers of the City of New York,” Feb 16, 1876, NYPL (circular), in Fogelson, *America’s Armories*, 50.

“right wheel,” rang out distinct and clear over the uproar.”²⁴ A veteran also emphasized the “closed ranks, perfect alignment, and steady carriage” of the volunteers.²⁵

Leading the march was the most impressive, but least effective unit, “a company of Hussars, mounted on white horses, and riding two abreast with drawn swords, on a walk directly through the centre of the crowd.”²⁶ However, they made “conspicuous marks” for men throwing stones, and were shortly knocked off their horses.²⁷

Authorities hoped that the militia’s appearance alone would calm the rioters, but it had the reverse effect. The regiment’s performance was disrupted, much as Macready’s had been three nights earlier. The belligerent crowd followed the same tactics they had used to assert “audience sovereignty” in the theater. They hissed, groaned, heckled, and threw things at the representatives of the aristocratic class. Unfortunately for the militia (and the eventual victims of the night) the available ammunition was more dangerous than the vegetables thrown on Monday; street repair work had left a large pile of cobblestones within arm’s reach of the mob.

There were a number of obstacles to the militia’s performance that inhibited the available modes of communication. The crowd had extinguished the street lamps, and according to General Sandford, “all I could see was a dense mass of people before me.”²⁸ Furthermore, the din was such that when officers shouted for the crowd to disburse or be fired upon, the warning was not heard. By producing noise and putting out the lights, the crowd had limited the militia’s ability to communicate with sound or visual display.

But perhaps the greatest challenge to the Silk Stockings was the crowd’s belief that the militia would only give a *performance* of power, and not execute violence. Matthew Hale Smith wrote, “it was not believed that

24 Joel Tyler Headley, *The Great Riots of New York, 1712-1873* (New York; Indianapolis: E. B. Treat, Bobbs-Merrill, 1873), 123.

25 Clark, *History of the Second Company of the Seventh Regiment*, 192.

26 “Courier and New York Enquirer,” May 11, 1849.

27 American citizen, *A Rejoinder to “The Replies from England, Etc. to Certain Statements Circulated in This Country Respecting Mr. Macready.”* (Stringer & Townsend, 1849), 79.

28 American Citizen, *Rejoinder*, 81.

they would fire.... If called out, it was presumed that they would fraternize with the people.”²⁹ In the context of this skepticism, it seems that the militia’s performance was structured to separate and elevate the regiment from ordinary citizens.

Having failed to disburse the crowd by visual display and verbal warning, and with as much as two thirds of their force wounded, officers gave the order to fire.³⁰ The first volley was aimed over the heads of the assembled. It was a threat, an attempt to perform their willingness to do damage if the crowd remained. But once again, rioters believed it was only a show. A false rumor spread that the militia had only blank rounds, and the rioters redoubled their attack.

Finally, the Seventh Regiment was ordered to fire directly into the crowd. Even here, they had not marked particular targets, and the desired result was not the death of the unlucky individuals who received the bullets. Without diminishing the seriousness of its effect, we can say that even the direct fire was also intended as a performance. To the greater crowd, and to the mass audience that would read it in their newspapers, the militia signaled civic command over public space.

Historian Brian McConachie writes that “from a dramaturgical point of view, the 1849 riot was a failure [for the rioters].... the pyramid of dramatic action was truncated by the arrival of the militia.”³¹ I would argue that from the perspective of the militia themselves, their intervention was a dramatic success. Although their hopes were initially unfulfilled—the spectacle of the military on horseback failed to chasten the crowd—they eventually succeeded in demonstrating their sovereignty over the streets. With an explosive finale, the Regiment had dramatized the supremacy of law and order.

The Seventh Regiment’s response to the riot enforced its dominance over the urban landscape of street theater, but their performance split public opinion. Future appearances carried the weight of Astor Place, and the regiment’s pageantry was resisted in some quarters.

The soldiers were jeered when they left Astor Place in the morning. And that night, speakers at a rally lampooned them as “gingerbread

29 Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (New York: J.B. Burr and Company, 1868), 560.

30 Wolfe, *Chronological history*, 262.

31 Bruce A. McConachie, *Theatre for working-class audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 39-40.

soldiers” who never “shouldered a musket to fight for their country” but were “valiant enough to pour lead upon the unarmed multitude.”³²

Captain Emmons Clark wrote in 1864,

For a long time after the Astor Place Riot, a feeling of bitter hostility existed toward the Seventh Regiment among the reckless and disorderly classes of the New York populace, and it has continued to some extent to the present day. Bets were freely offered that the Regiment would never parade again... In some localities, it was unsafe... to appear in uniform.³³

In 1849, for only the second time in its history, the Seventh didn't parade on the Fourth of July. The reason was understood to be “the hostility of the dangerous classes” to the regiment that fired at Astor Place.³⁴

But to the upper classes, the regiment gained prestige.³⁵ Smith wrote in 1868, “From that moment they took their high place as the conservators of peace, which position they have never lost. Their discipline, soldierly bearing, full ranks, and splendid marching, have been the theme of universal praise.”³⁶ Performing at Astor Place defined their reputation, changing the meaning of their performances to come.

In this talk I have examined the Seventh Regiment as performers competing for representation in public space in a struggle that paralleled the battle for cultural authority within the theater. Historians tend to separate militia's ceremonial functions from their military actions, but for elite units that suppressed urban riots, these capacities were embedded in one another. For the Seventh Regiment, they were both part of a process of dominating public space with impressive performances.

This paper is meant in part to call for greater attention to the militia's role in the Astor Place Riot. I do not mean to blame the militiamen, who carried out orders and withstood a hail of stones before firing. However, the historical record indicates that they were not perceived as neutral parties in a conflict that antagonized the working class against the elite.

Inside the opera house, Macready had finished his performance in spite of a diminishing crowd as many patrons, hearing gunshots and

32 Mike Walsh and Isaiah Rynders in *The New York Herald*, May 12, 1849.

33 Clark, *History of the Second Company of the Seventh Regiment*, 194-195.

34 Clark, *History of the Second Company of the Seventh Regiment*, 198.

35 Clark, *History of the Second Company of the Seventh Regiment*, 195.

36 Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 560.

windows shattering, had left the theater early. So as not to be recognized and attacked, Macready snuck through the crowd in disguise. He took the first available steamer from Boston and never performed in America again. The rioters had achieved their immediate objective, but lost the greater battle for representation in public space.

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