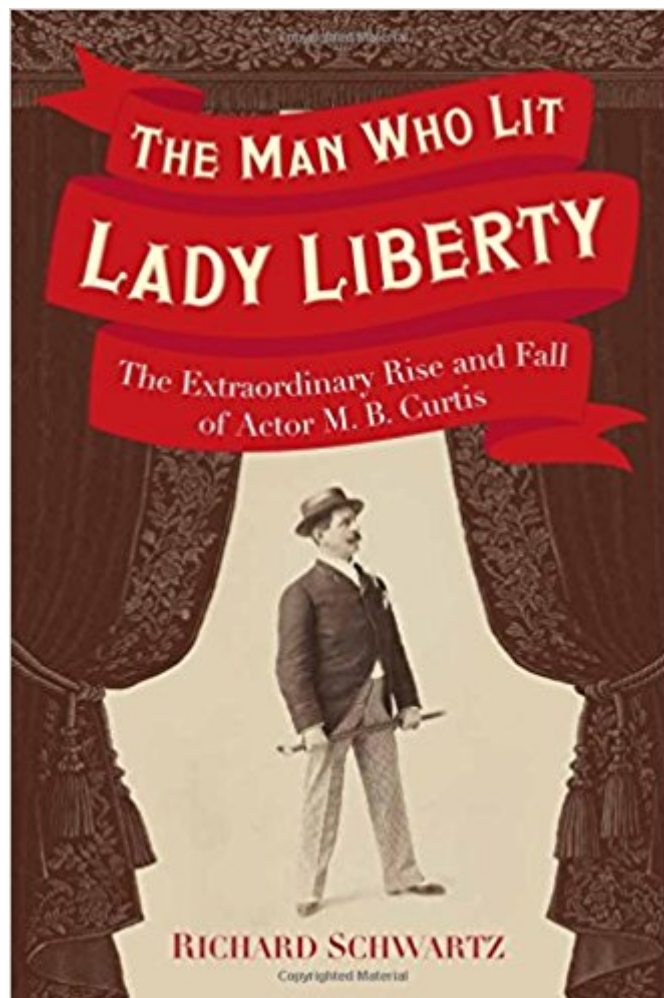




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# The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty: The Extraordinary Rise And Fall Of Actor M. B. Curtis



## Synopsis

As the Statue of Liberty stood unlit and unloved by American politicians in 1886, one of her saviors was creating a theatrical sensation at New York's Fourteenth Street Theatre. Actor M.B. Curtis, who had achieved overnight success in *Sam'l of Posen*, a groundbreaking play that transcended the common stereotypes of Jewish characters current at the time, was basking in public accolades at every curtain call when he came to Lady Liberty's aid. Curtis's rise to the top of his profession and his resulting fall from grace is a dramatic arc that rivals anything created for the stage. Actor, producer, real estate developer, promoter, hotelier, benefactor, and murder suspect, M. B. Curtis's life encompassed the highs of celebrity and fame as well as the lows of failure, illness, and a faltering career. *The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty* rescues M. B. Curtis's story from the dusty archives of forgotten history and reexamines an actor whose creativity and cultural influence still resonate today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Schwartz’s intriguing portrayal of celebrity, status, and desperation illuminates the underbelly of an exciting, rapidly changing time.” —BookLife  
“[A] terrific tale of [the] world-famous actor who transformed Berkeley.” —Frances Dinkelspiel, *Berkeleyside*  
“One of the most phenomenal books I have ever read.” —Dan Manly, radio broadcaster on WMST Mount Sterling  
“[Curtis] really was a folk hero really deserves to be remembered and he is remembered here, lovingly, in this wonderful book.” —Dean Karayanis, host of *The History Author Show*  
“Fascinating...an excellent

read and leaves you wanting more. —Ric Bratton, host of “This Week in America” —“How fortunate we are to have Richard Schwartz to put color in M. B. Curtis’s cheeks, a glint in his eyes, and have him stride the stage again.” —Malcolm Margolin, author and publisher emeritus of Heyday —“An outstanding new biography of one of the most talented character actors of his time.” —Barry Moreno, historian and author, the Bob Hope Memorial Library at Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty National Monument

As the Statue of Liberty stood unlit and unloved by American politicians in 1886, one of her saviors was creating a theatrical sensation at New York’s Fourteenth Street Theatre. Actor M. B. Curtis, who had achieved overnight success in *Sam’l of Posen*, a groundbreaking play that transcended the common stereotypes of Jewish characters current at the time, was basking in public accolades at every curtain call when he came to Lady Liberty’s aid. Curtis’s rise to the top of his profession and his resulting fall from grace is a dramatic arc that rivals anything created for the stage. Actor, producer, real estate developer, promoter, hotelier, benefactor, and murder suspect, Curtis reached the highs of celebrity and fame as well as the lows of failure, illness, and a faltering career. *The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty* rescues his story from the dusty archives of forgotten history and reexamines an actor whose creativity and cultural influence still resonate today.

This book was most interesting to me as I never knew about this unknown episode when Congress refused to light the Statue of Liberty, and Curtis - as a citizen - actually paid for it himself when he arrived in New York to perform. As a lover of history, this book certainly enlightened me to events that I didn’t know about - that now fascinate me. The event about the Statue of Liberty, a true story, should be taught to students in American History classes. (I hope they still teach American History) Totally recommend this book!! I now happily plan to pass this book along to my husband who I’m sure will end-up reading it through the night.

I became infatuated with not only Schwartz’s unique and sophisticated style of writing, but the massive and unparalleled pieces of information he brings to life through his potent words. I mean, seriously, how many books delve so deep into detail? He is an expert in research and devotes a great deal of facts, details, and sources to this research that he constantly produces into exhilarating writing. Schwartz’s love for quirky characters is an essential ingredient in his writing. It makes for memorable reads. Schwartz has earned plaudits for his work from this piece and he gave a number of speeches and radio talks about this

book and I have tried to attend some. And yes, M.B. Curtis was by far a quirky character. He was a larger-than-life personality who was actually a child run away. Curtis's story is one of a major rise and fall from grace. After being rejected from the Union army as a drummer boy due to the fact that he was too young during the Civil War, he managed to find as a promising young actor. The roles that he began his career with were rather minimal, until he etched quite the resume as a Jewish actor who accurately depicted Jewish people in America- it having never been allowed before Curtis's touch. He was a trailblazer in that sense, he went beyond the stereotype and gave people an accurate account of comical, witty, Jewish people in America and made them human beings to laugh WITH not AT. He won over crowds with his humor and rose to national prominence overnight with this character role of Sam Spector of Posen. He became one of the most widely recognized actors in the country and beyond, earning a king's ransom in the process. And while we're on it he paid out of his own finances to light the statue of liberty. Yes, there are no inaccuracies in that statement. He had developed a fascination with the statue while acting in New York within days of Lady Liberty being dedicated. He could not withstand the darkness of an unlit statue of liberty and felt the need to do it himself. He is the only person in history to ever complete such a feat. An immigrant plunked down the cash to light Lady Liberty! An immigrant went out of his own pocket to pay for an operation that Congress chose not to do. I mean, what more do you want to know?!?!? How has this name, M.B. Curtis, been forgotten from textbooks and films across the country? How is he not lauded as a visionary and a historical figure who people are reading and learning about in classrooms every day? So famous was Curtis at the time, he rubbed elbows with some of the most poetic and famed figures of his generation, including Mark Twain. Of course, the plot thickens when he undergoes a great fall from grace and is even accused in a murder. One aspect I really admire about Schwartz is his high-order commitment to the story. As he has said both on the record and off of it (I took in a speech of his in Philadelphia), he studied thousands of sources for this story. The more he researched, the more intrigued he became. The more he felt the need to chart these significant contributions to society. Wow. I think Schwartz really told a story that was an "underdog" type of story and that had slipped the radar of American journalists and reporters. My vision and hope is that Schwartz's book becomes a must-read in both American history classes and a classic- and I think it would make an amazing period piece movie. It embodies the heart, passion, soul, and rich little details Schwartz constantly sprinkles into his work. In addition to this, it once again allows Schwartz magnificent love for the quirky characters to appear. I highly recommend this work. Zach Smart

The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty's is the fascinating true story of M.B. Curtis, a Jewish immigrant born in Hungary in the mid-19th Century and raised in Detroit. He became an actor and, astonishingly, in one role in one play, he quickly became prodigiously famous and rich. His fame and wealth led him to undertake many charitable works (such as paying to illuminate the newly dedicated Statue of Liberty when Congress refused to), to live extravagantly, and to speculate grandiosely in real estate. Richard Schwartz, through a meticulous and exhaustive examination of newspaper and theater archives all across the U.S., through court records and letters, drawings and photographs, has resurrected this now forgotten and complex man, whose life rode fortune's wheel from the bottom, to the top, and then back to the bottom to the delight of the press (I thought how similar Curtis's life was in many ways to OJ Simpson's). The book is well-written and flows like a Greek tragedy to the actor's end. This is an absorbing history of the era of Sarah Bernhardt and Mark Twain, both of whom briefly crossed paths with Curtis. The echoes of our own time are more than evident and I was glad to discover this lost actor, whose name was written on water but now comes to life again.

Couldn't put this book down. Amazing story of a Jewish immigrant and his crazy life. Curtis's story is particularly apropos to the current immigration debate, and a reminder that American history was made by immigrants. How was this story ever forgotten until now???

Thoroughly researched life story of a relatively unknown but fascinating man. MB Curtis' life had many twists and turns - a case where truth was stranger than fiction! You will thoroughly enjoy this step back in time.

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