

EAST BAY TIMES

Berkeley historian Richard Schwartz to read from latest book

“The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty” tells the story of nationally-famed actor and later Berkeley developer M.B. Curtis

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BERKELEY — Berkeley historian and author Richard Schwartz will sign his newest book, “The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty: The Extraordinary Rise and Fall of Actor M.B. Curtis,” at three upcoming readings in the East Bay.

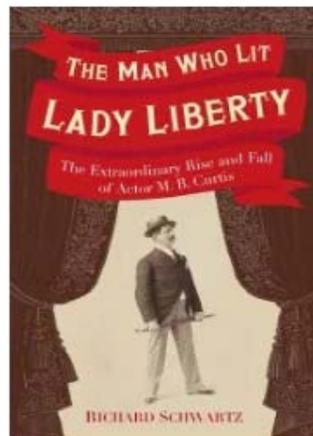
“The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty: The Extraordinary Rise and Fall of Actor M.B. Curtis” was written by Berkeley Berkeley historian and author Richard Schwartz.

The book chronicles the life of Maurice B. Curtis, who gained nationwide fame in the 1880s in the title role of the play “Sam’l of Posen” by George H. Jessop, featuring a Jewish traveling salesman as the hero, somewhat of a novelty in the theater at a time when Jewish characters primarily were laughed at.

The title of the book alludes to an event Schwartz came upon during his research.

“As the Statue of Liberty stood in darkness in 1886, her savior was a fellow immigrant — the actor M.B. Curtis, who had achieved overnight success in a groundbreaking play that transcended the stereotypes of Jewish characters of his time,” reads a description on the back cover of the book.

By the late 1880s, Curtis was a real estate developer in Berkeley, with a portfolio that included the Peralta Park Hotel, since demolished.



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Among the twists of fate in Curtis' up-and-down life, he was charged with murder of a San Francisco policeman following a drunken altercation with a mugger, and eventually acquitted. Curtis died a pauper in 1920.

Berkeley's Posen Avenue is named in reference to the play that launched Curtis' acting career, and Albina Avenue after the stage name of Curtis' wife, Albina De Mer.

Schwartz' previous books include "Eccentrics, Heroes, and Cutthroats of Old Berkeley" (2007); "Earthquake Exodus, 1906" (2005); "Berkeley 1900 — Daily Life at the Turn of the Century" (2000); and "The Circle of Stones" (1995).

Schwartz will present his latest book at the following times and places:

- 2 to 3:30 p.m. Oct. 15, Oakland Public Library, 125 14th St., Oakland.
- 7 p.m. Nov. 16, Oakland Heritage Alliance, Chapel of the Chimes, 4499 Piedmont Ave., Oakland.
- 7 p.m. Dec. 21, Congregation Beth El, 1301 Oxford St., Berkeley.