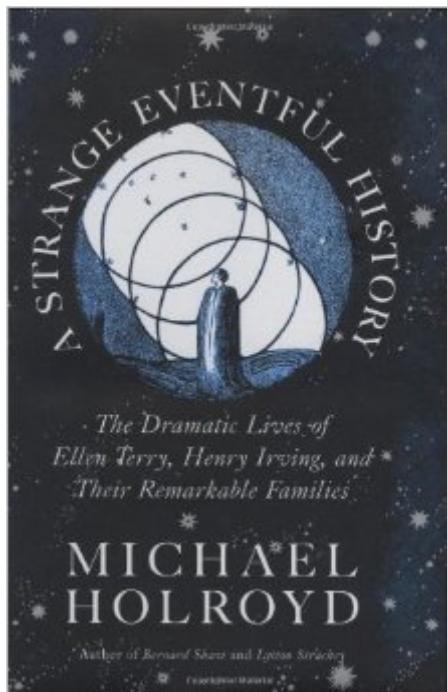


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# A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives Of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, And Their Remarkable Families



## Synopsis

Deemed a prodigy among biographers by The New York Times Book Review, Michael Holroyd transformed biography into an art. Now he turns his keen observation, humane insight, and epic scope on an ensemble cast, a remarkable dynasty that presided over the golden age of theater. Ellen Terry was an ethereal beauty, the child bride of a Pre-Raphaelite painter who made her the face of the age. George Bernard Shaw was so besotted by her gifts that he could not bear to meet her, lest the spell she cast from the stage be broken. Henry Irving was an ambitious, harsh-voiced merchant's clerk, but once he painted his face and spoke the lines of Shakespeare, his stammer fell away to reveal a magnetic presence. He would become one of the greatest actor-managers in the history of the theater. Together, Terry and Irving created a powerhouse of the arts in London's Lyceum Theatre, with Bram Stoker "who would go on to write Dracula" as manager. Celebrities whose scandalous private lives commanded global attention, they took America by storm in wildly popular national tours. Their all-consuming professional lives left little room for their brilliant but troubled children. Henry's boys followed their father into the theater but could not escape the shadow of his fame. Ellen's feminist daughter, Edy, founded an avant-garde theater and a largely lesbian community at her mother's country home. But it was Edy's son, the revolutionary theatrical designer Edward Gordon Craig, who possessed the most remarkable gifts and the most perplexing inability to realize them. A now forgotten modernist visionary, he collaborated with the Russian director Stanislavski on a production of Hamlet that forever changed the way theater was staged. Maddeningly self-absorbed, he inherited his mother's potent charm and fathered thirteen children by eight women, including a daughter with the dancer Isadora Duncan. An epic story spanning a century of cultural change, *A Strange Eventful History* finds space for the intimate moments of daily existence as well as the bewitching fantasies played out by its subjects. Bursting with charismatic life, it is an incisive portrait of two families who defied the strictures of their time. It will be swiftly recognized as a classic.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 640 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; First Edition edition (March 3, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374270805

ISBN-13: 978-0374270803

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 2.2 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (7 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,631,898 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #840 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Theatre #3529 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Great Britain #12963 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Actors & Entertainers

## Customer Reviews

When asked what book I was reading I replied, "A dual biography of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and their artistic families I was met with signs of utter bemusement! Who? Most Americans are clueless when it comes to remember these two brilliant novas in the theatrical skies over Victorian and Edwardian England. This omission can be rectified by reading this new book by Michael Holroyd whose earlier three volume work on George Bernard Shaw won plaudits galore! Holroyd is the spouse of Margaret Drabble the novelist. Ellen Terry (1847-1924) was not the greatest English actress of all time but she was probably the most bewitchingly beautiful and fetching! She was born to acting parents; wed three times and had two illegitimate children Edy and Edward Gordon Craig (they were the children of her liaison with a man of the theatre named Godwin. The children took their name Craig from a land configuration in Scotland. Ellen's first husband of ten months was the much older G.W. Watts who was a distinguished painter. He was too old and ascetic for the earthy and sexy Miss Terry. Many of her siblings acted including her older sister Kate who became the grandmother of Oscar Winner and Shakespearean star Sir John Gielgud. Ellen had a sunny, optimistic personality. Fair Ellen was a mercurial person in her moods and loves. She corresponded for years with the besotted George Bernard Shaw. She became a Dame of the British Empire shortly before her death and was beloved of English theatre goers. She acted many of the great Shakespearean heroines including Juliet, Beatrice, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind and Hermione. She was probably intimate with Henry Irving during their seventeen years of work at the Lyceum Theatre in London. Sir Henry Irving (1838-1905) was born in Cornwall in dirt poverty.

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Daniel Day-Lewis decides to start his own theatre company and hires as his leading lady an actress who combines the allure of Julie Christie, the figure of Nicole Kidman, the lovability of Kate Winslet -- with the talent of all three. And imagine that these two now hold sway as the cynosure of theatre excellence for fifty years -- as National Treasures -- admired respected,

and adored! Then you might have some idea of the position Henry Irving and Ellen Terry held in the last half of the Nineteenth Century in England -- and in America too, where they toured with great success. Between the two of them they raised the craft of acting to such a point that they became the first English born actors ever to be knighted. Like Day-Lewis, Irving had a gift for characters of infernal stripe, creatures of shadow, sleath, darkness: Shylock, Richard III, Iago. Whereas Ellen Terry shed a light so endearing, whole theatres would sigh ahhh in joyous relief when she sunnily appeared. Ellen Terry came from a big old theatre family -- Gielgud is a member of it. Irving came from nothing. Together on the Lyceum stage, they played the commercial and classic successes of their time in expensive productions and to huge audiences. Whole trains were given over to them, their big companies, and the sets they traveled with when they toured. The English-speaking world was fascinated by them. Oscar Wilde wrote sonnets to Ellen Terry. Sargent painted her. Shaw sought to seduce her with his plays. They produced four remarkable children, although not by one another.

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