

## THE TWILIGHT OF EDWIN BOOTH

by Maria A. Dering

Of all the statues in Manhattan perhaps the most poignant is that of Edwin Booth in Gramercy Park. Hand to heart, Booth, dressed as Hamlet, faces the home where he died on 6 June 1893 in a second-floor room. The choice of character is fitting: it was the role for which Booth was known best, perhaps because he played Hamlet for 100 consecutive nights in 1864-5. His head is slightly bowed, accepting silent applause; he is thoughtful, meditative, handsome, young – an embodiment of both the ideal Hamlet and the prince of players.

Following the 1919 dedication of Edmond T. Quinn's statue, *Theatre Magazine* wrote: "In the silver haze of a November noon the art of the stage was honored by an event that was unique in New York. The first statue erected to an actor in the world's metropolis was unveiled in Gramercy Park. It was America's manner of knighting Edwin Booth. . . . His daughter, Edwina Booth Grossmann, sat on a rustic seat at his feet. His grandson, Edwin Booth Grossmann, lifted his son, the actor's infant great grandson, in his arms, to look at the smiling bronze."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 1919, the family had not

moved far from the spot of the actor's final bow: the 1920 census reveals that the family of Edwin Booth Grossmann lived at 133 East 21st Street (now called Gramercy Park North). More about this later.

The statue of Booth is best seen on a cloudy-sunny late autumn day. Bare trees allow passersby to see Booth head on. Better still, and perhaps more theatrically lit, is a vantage point from within the National Arts Club or the Players on a wintry night as streetlamps fill Booth's face with light in the cold, clear air.

My frequent walks through the neighborhood surrounding the park have led me to wonder why Edwin Booth is so little known today. Perhaps it was felt that he shared his brother John Wilkes' opinions of Lincoln and secession, or that John might have tacitly influenced Edwin through close familial contact. Neither is correct.

In his own words, Edwin had very little to do with this brother. He comments in an 1881 letter to Nahum Capen:

I can give you very little information regarding my brother John. I seldom saw him since his early boyhood in Baltimore. . . . We regarded him as a good-hearted, harmless, though wild-brained boy, and used to laugh at his patriotic froth whenever secession was discussed.

. . . Knowing my [Union] sentiments, [John] avoided me, rarely visiting my house, except to see his mother, when political



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topics were not touched upon, at least in my presence."<sup>2</sup>

Booth was absent from his family for long periods. Beginning at the age of 13, Edwin toured with his difficult, sometimes disturbing father, Junius Brutus Booth. The latter was born in London in 1796 and immigrated to the United States in 1821, where he became enormously popular in Shakespearean and other classical roles. Edwin made his own debut on tour in Boston on 10 September 1849, in the part of Tressel to his father's Richard III in the play of the same name. Two years later, while Junius was indisposed, Edwin took on the role of Richard that he had learned by observing his father.

Edwin stayed on the road, with or without Junius, from 1852 through 1857. His father died while they were on tour in California. From there, Edwin traveled to Australia and Hawaii, returning to the United States in 1857. In 1860, after a series of performances in New York, he achieved a measure of fame in his own right,

emerging from his father's shadow to enthrall a younger generation of playgoers. Given the long periods of time Edwin spent away from John, it is unlikely that a close bond could or would have developed between the brothers. Nor did Edwin share John's political convictions: Edwin voted for Abraham Lincoln and notes proudly in a letter of the time that he did so.

Only once did Edwin and John appear onstage together. On 25 November 1864, after Edwin had become co-manager of New York's Winter Garden Theatre, he and his brothers Junius Brutus and John Wilkes, appeared playing, respectively, the roles of Brutus, Cassius, and Marc Antony, in *Julius Caesar*. John Wilkes assassinated Lincoln on 14 April 1865, was hunted down in Virginia, and Edwin retired from the stage temporarily.

Another misconception about Edwin Booth is that he was a quintessentially English actor. Although his father, Junius Brutus, Sr., was born in London, Edwin was born near Belair, Maryland, on 13 November 1833. His mother was Mary Ann Holmes, the second wife of Junius Brutus, who married her in 1821 in London while, some believe, he was still married to his first wife, the Belgian-born Marie Christine Adelaide DeLanoye.<sup>3</sup>

Junius Brutus and Mary Ann had ten children, of whom Edwin was the seventh. His siblings were: Junius Brutus, Jr.;

<sup>2</sup> Edwina Booth Grossmann, *Edwin Booth: Recollections by His Daughter* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1894), p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> For those readers who would like to do a bit of genealogical digging, it would be a challenge to find out if Mlle DeLanoye was related to the Philippe DeLanoye who came to America and was credited with founding the House of Delano. Bonne chance!

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Hornblow, ed. *Theatre Magazine* (New York: Theatre Magazine Company) 1919, vol. 29, no. 1, p. 34.

## THE TWILIGHT OF EDWIN BOOTH (continued)

Rosalie Ann; Henry Byron; Mary Ann; Frederick; Elizabeth; Asia; Joseph Adrian; and John Wilkes, the youngest. (Henry, Mary Ann, Frederick, and Elizabeth died in childhood.)

Edwin Booth, as noted earlier, learned his craft from his father on the road as they crossed the United States, performing in a wide variety of locations, including California mining towns. Eventually, as is the case in so many father-son stories, the younger Booth excels over the elder, and makes his fame and fortune in his own chosen realm – the heart of Manhattan.

In 1863, Booth put down roots in New York with the purchase of a house at 107 East 17th Street. That same year, he bought a house at 28 East 19th Street (now called “the block beautiful”), which he owned for 25 years. (Note that Booth’s mother lived at 339 West 23rd Street, fairly close to the Booth Theatre, and to Edwin’s own home. She died in 1885.)

Led by his success, ambition, and drive to open his own theater, Booth opened the eponymous house at 374 Sixth Avenue (at 23rd Street) in 1868. Many theatres flourished at this time in what has become known as the Flatiron District, taking its name from the Flatiron Building on Fifth Avenue and 23rd. However, Booth’s location was on the fringe of the district and, coupled with the actor’s lack of financial skill, the theatre went bankrupt in 1874. In order to pay his debts, Booth began to tour and perform locally again. The theatre reopened several years later, under new management. In the *Annals of the New York Stage*, George C.D. Odell observes:

[In 1877-78], Richard III ran for two solid weeks [at the Booth Theatre, now under new management], except that, to lighten his Saturday two-fold burden, Booth acted Cardinal Wolsey, at the matinee on the 12th . . . and Wolsey and Petrucchio . . . on Saturday evening, January 19th. . . . On Saturday evening, January 26th, Booth, having played Hamlet at the matinee, took up what to our surprise we have known he considered the “lighter” part of Iago. . . . On the 29th, Booth essayed Shylock, and on the 30th and 31st, and February 1st, he appeared in his powerful interpretation of Bertuccio, in *The Fool’s Revenge*, the performance concluding with Lend me Five Shillings.<sup>4</sup>

Booth followed a grueling schedule that would never be undertaken today except by the most adventurous, or foolhardy, actor. Yet he continued to perform until his final appearance as Hamlet in 1891 at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn.

In the late 1880s, Booth moved from East 19th Street to a renovated building across from the park. He purchased the four-story 1840s building at no. 16 Gramercy Park South for \$150,000. Architect Stanford White redecorated it - an interesting but not surprising choice, since White’s father was a noted Shakespearean scholar of his time. In 1888-89, Booth took up residence at no.16 and founded the Players Club during the same year. He died at home in 1893 at the age of 60.

Booth’s only child, Edwina, was at his side when he passed away. In her memoir, Edwina Booth Grossmann writes:

As he lay dying, unconscious even of my presence, or of the fearful electric storm which was raging without, on that sad afternoon of the sixth of June, a glory seemed to rest upon his

features . . . And when the dark curtain of night had fallen, and the storm had ceased without . . . we were startled by the sudden going out of all the electric lights in the chamber and in the street beneath. Was such darkness ever felt before? Alas! Not for me.<sup>5</sup>

The window of the room in which Edwin Booth died is visible on a walking tour of Gramercy Park and its environs. One can stroll through the neighborhood in about an hour, and it will be 60 minutes well spent. Here, the casual tourist will find many original buildings, some that Booth himself would have seen as he walked through his neighborhood. Unlike Lower Manhattan and fashionable Fifth Avenue, Gramercy Park has preserved a number of original buildings from the 1830s-1880s, when the area underwent its greatest development.

This fascinating neighborhood holds many more treasures, some of which Booth would have seen during his lifetime. I encourage you to walk along Irving Place, East 18th and 19th Streets, and enjoy the architectural gems to be found here. Of course, the park is the centerpiece of the neighborhood, but you’ll have to have a key to enter. It’s the only remaining private park in Manhattan, access to which residents around the park may have for a fee. In its earliest days, the park’s keys were said to be golden and cost \$10 each.

To obtain written instructions for a self-guided tour of this lovely neighborhood, please contact the author at [mariadering@earthlink.net](mailto:mariadering@earthlink.net) or contact Lauren Maehrlein at 212-755-8532, ext. 36.

### Six Degrees of Separation

When I mentioned the family of Edwin Booth Grossmann earlier, I suggested that there would be more information forthcoming. Here it is:

1. I am married to Floyd Smith Sanford III.
2. His mother was Sara Elizabeth (née Hitch) Sanford.
3. She played with Lois Grossmann in Gramercy Park when they were young girls in the 1920s.
4. Lois Grossmann was the daughter of Edwin Booth Grossmann and Helen Lamar Foos.
5. Edwin Booth Grossmann was the son of Edwina Booth who married Ignatius Grossmann, a Hungarian businessman.
6. Edwina nee Booth Grossmann was the daughter of Edwin Booth and his first wife, Mary Devlin.

New York is full of stories such as these. I encourage you to find them as you walk through our fascinating city.

For further reading:

References: Books

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<sup>4</sup> George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*. Vol. X (1875-1879) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), p. 366.

<sup>5</sup> Grossmann, p. 22.