

## EDWIN BOOTH IN GALVESTON AND HOUSTON

THERE was great excitement in Galveston theatrical circles in mid-September of 1881 when the announcement came that Edwin Booth would spend a whole week in the city at the end of January. The report was authentic. A *News* representative had seen the contract, which was dated August 29. It was in truth to be a season of notable stage performances. Lawrence Barrett and Frederick Warde were also billed with repertories of classical and Shakesperian drama. Barrett's scholarly assumption of Cassius (in *Julius Caesar*, December 29), with its finish and symmetry, was his *pièce de résistance*; Warde, in his first season as a star, had preceded Barrett; the young actor essayed a number of McCullough's best parts, and gave a fine study of Romeo, a role he had played in England with Adelaide Neilson.

On January 3, L. E. Spencer, manager of the Tremont Opera House, posted a notice saying that owing to the very large guarantee made to induce Booth to visit the city, prices for seats would have to be considerably advanced; and applicants for tickets, especially in the interior, were of such numbers that no seats could be considered reserved till paid for. Prices were quoted thus: general admission was 50 cents, \$1, and \$1.50; parquette and parquette circle, \$2; dress circle, \$1.50.<sup>1</sup>

Booth chose to make his debut on a Texas stage in Bulwer Lytton's blank verse historical drama, *Richelieu* (January 24). At the moment of the first entrance of Richelieu (Act I, scene 2), when he questions the Capuchin Joseph about "this new conspiracy," the audience saw the great actor begin to mould the wily Cardinal into form. His bodily weakness was shown by a slowness and tremulousness of movement. The voice

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 53

at times quavered and even appeared to crack; the slightest effort brought on a hacking cough, which had to be relieved by recourse to the lozenge-box. Many in the house thought the actor cold in these early passages; and it was not until the later scenes, where, with surprising force and violence, Richelieu denounced Barradas and invoked the powers of the Church in aid of the persecuted Julie, that they felt the great effect of his fervor and passion. There was no doubt but Booth entirely pleased the patrons of the Tremont. Barton Hill as Barradas seemed to understand his part, as did Bella Pateman, who was Julie; but the support generally was declared to be only of a fair order.

A noteworthy feature of the tragedian's *Macbeth*, presented the following night, was that it employed no objective ghost, as Irving and other players were accustomed to have. The *News* has left us a good account of Booth's portrayal of the terror-haunted Scotsman.

At first doubting, then alternating fear with dashes of the valorous spirit that has bound him so closely to Duncan and finally submitting himself to the wiles of his wife, he, through all of this, builds a form and presentment that are unlike any other, and yet that instinctively stands in comparison with that which has gone before.

The masterpiece of Booth's repertory was of course his *Hamlet*, in which the actor was seen January 26. This play admirers had come from far and wide to see; and the 1400 who packed the opera house heard every word and watched every movement of the great tragedian with enthusiasm. Readers of today may wonder what kind of Hamlet the actor portrayed in the early eighties. To J. Palgrave Simpson, who saw the American's revival of the tragedy at the Princess Theatre, London, November 6, 1880, the Hamlet was definitely not of the "old school," as many critics of that time claimed it was. Simpson thought Booth's Prince intense—oc-

asionally a trifle too intense, as in his vehement and shrieking utterance of the words: "Is it the king?"

Instead of being the slave of *tradition*, I found him constantly neglecting old traditional points—of which his manner after the *Play scene*, when his exultation would not give time to wait until the crowd had wholly dispersed, was, perhaps, the most notable. . . . Another instance may be given of his delivery of the words, "I'll rant as well as thou," which were not howled or ranted, as is commonly the case, but uttered with a profound contempt of the *ranting* of Laertes.<sup>2</sup>

Booth's Hamlet was graceful and dignified, with nothing of pompousness or formal reserve. In the scene with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern he displayed a notable charm of manner. His speech to the players was delivered with ease and modest reticence. He treated Osric with courtesy, rather than with anger or impatience, preferring to show his contempt of the fop in playful asides to Horatio. He displayed a tenderness for Ophelia that made it clear he really loved her, and uttered the words, "Get thee to a nunnery,"<sup>3</sup> as well-meant advice rather than as a denunciation—the whole a touching scene that reached every heart in the audience. In the closet scene his Hamlet reproached his mother with the restraint of a son unable to suppress a deep-rooted filial love. It was a well-considered presentment, mature in execution—a whole picture of the Prince, and not simply a display of disjointed scraps or fragments.

The *News* could find little to praise in Tom Taylor's melodrama, *The Fool's Revenge*, given on the twenty-seventh; and thought Booth "ill-suited" for the part of the deformed jester, Bertuccio, until the moment of the great crisis in Act III, when the failure of his plot became clear to him.<sup>4</sup> Here his cries—first of gleeful frenzy and then of agonized despair—provoked extraordinary excitement throughout the theatre. Until this "point" was made many in the house doubted that

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 55

the ungainly creature of misshapen legs and grotesque jestures was indeed the actor whom they had paid so much to see. It is no wonder that they were kept guessing, for, as William Winter said, few players who essayed the role showed such complete mastery of the stage business of buffoonery as did Booth;<sup>5</sup> few, too, could invest a melodramatic character with a like tragic power and moving force.

If Booth ever found any part difficult it must have been Shylock. He admitted as much in a letter to Horace H. Furness; in this he said that he had tried to get at the old money-lender through George Frederick Cooke's notes on his acting of the part. Cooke, he found, was indebted to Macklin for much he was praised for in the assumption.<sup>6</sup>

Galveston playgoers thought the tragedian's Shylock a well-rounded picture, finished to the hem of his Jewish gaberdine. They saw in the personation a thorough blending of dignity, hate, greed, cunning, deceit, and abject defeat. The actor made no effort to elevate the character to the gentlemanly level of Henry Irving's portrayal. There was a suggestion of impending evil in the playful manner in which Booth hid Shylock's malicious purpose as he made his bargain with Antonio. In the baiting scene, when he revealed his wild savagery, he was impetuous and terrible in his fury. One could not hear him say, "Let him look to his bond!" without feeling that dreadful consequences were intended at the trial; nor at the trial itself could one hear the words, "Is that the law?" and fail to comprehend the amazed horror and unbelief they were meant to convey. John R. Towse, who saw Booth often as Shylock, declared that Pope's couplet, long identified with Macklin's fine conception of the role, could be applied as well to Booth.

This the Jew  
That Shakespere drew.<sup>7</sup>

The receipts of the tragedian's performances show that the engagement was successful. *Richelieu* drew \$1,523.50; *Macbeth*, \$1,313.00; *Hamlet*, \$1,783.50; *The Fool's Revenge*, \$1,681.00; *Othello*, \$1,218.00; *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Quiet Family*, the afterpiece, \$1,122.00. The total was \$8,641.00.<sup>8</sup>

On the morning of February 21, 1887, Edwin Booth's private railroad car, the *David Garrick*, was uncoupled from a New Orleans train and set aside on a quiet track near the Galveston depot. The car, acquired but recently in New Orleans, was costing the actor \$3,000 for the journey from that city to San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> J. H. Magonigle, treasurer of the company and steward of the car, went uptown to look the market over for staple items and delicacies for the larder. For one thing, the star liked fruit glacé on lettuce, with French dressing. The steward had much to buy, for Mr. Booth spared no expense, and there were the eleven o'clock breakfast, the three o'clock dinner, and the midnight supper to think of. Booth himself, together with the "Chickens," as he called Misses Emma Vaders, Kitty Molony, and Ida Rock, the younger ladies of his company, drove out to enjoy the bracing salt air on the pretty Galveston beach.<sup>10</sup> Meantime the city was astir over the approaching grand attraction of the season. Local playgoers had been joined by out-of-town enthusiasts, many of whom were unable to find seats for either of the two nights of the actor's engagement, even at the outlandish prices they offered. *Richelieu* was the first play. In a two-night stand the tragedian generally gave *Richelieu* and *Hamlet*. Some patrons could recall Booth's portrayal of the crafty cardinal five years before; since then many had seen the more exuberant Keene and Warde in the part, actors who pictured a tremulous old man, roused occasionally to fits of violent temper.

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 57

For Booth's Richelieu of this visit we quote the *News*.

Booth throughout represents the cardinal as characterized by a natural flow of humor, which, though at times biting and sardonic, is at other times intensely full of human kindness and lights up his otherwise severe character in a wonderful manner. When public expectation is strong to a tension awaiting the famous passage when Richelieu tells François that "in the lexicon of youth reserved for brighter manhood there is no such word as fail" Booth rather disappoints his audience by not making of this dramatic climax what other actors of less genius are capable of. He brings out the sympathetic side of the character admirably and his interpretation is characterized with a finesse of perception that demands appreciation.

The following night at *Hamlet* the largest house ever at a dramatic attraction at the Tremont forced the orchestra out of the pit and behind the curtain—a procedure not unusual at a Booth performance; it had happened in Boston. A New Orleans barber had given the actor a short haircut, which he thought would spoil his "business," since his Prince when meditative would run his hand through his hair.<sup>11</sup> It is doubtful, though, that the short hair bothered him at all. From the moment in the first scene of Act I, when Hamlet is discovered in the presence of the King, till the line, "Oh, I die, Horatio . . .", the vast audience sat rapt in the spell of the actor's resonant voice. They never missed a word he said or failed to see a line in his mobile face. They witnessed a painstaking, studious, and spirited performance, which only superlatives could describe. Of the support, Emma Vader's Ophelia was best in the mad scene. Her voice was sweet and sympathetic, though lacking in volume. John Malone as Polonius (said the *News*) "read his lines too much like a devout but ranting minister would a sermon." Carl Ahrendt disregarded Hamlet's advice to the players by being too free with the text. But it is not likely that many in the audience saw and heard more than Hamlet.

The advance notices that Booth would appear in Houston on February 23 seemed to put the playgoing fraternity of the city into a greater frenzy than the news that he had been booked for Galveston had done to the islanders. Drama enthusiasts, too, as far inland as Waco and Austin, in their eagerness to see the "Prince of Players," planned theatre parties for the event and sought to reserve seats at Pillot's. Houston had waited long to see Booth, and the tragedian, now 56, was getting along in years. So many requests for tickets did manager Bergman receive that he could scarcely satisfy half of them. When the day of the great player's appearance arrived disappointed ticket-seekers were offering ten, twelve, and as high as fifteen dollars for tickets that had sold for two and three. One man gave \$50 for three places in the parquet circle; late in the afternoon some seats went for \$18 and \$20 each, and just before the curtain rose there were a few sales for \$25.

Admittedly, Booth's Hamlet was an intelligent, scholarly, conscientious, and zealous performance; but getting away from those adjectives, specifically, how did the man act? Was he too spirited? Did he wave his arms too much, and move about too freely, "sometimes with a harlequin's suddenness," as Mr. Dutton Cook thought he did?<sup>12</sup> Did he rely too much on facial play (of which his adherents claimed he was a master), and make too much use of his expressive and luminous eyes (eyes that Ellen Terry declared were the most wonderful pair she ever looked upon)? Booth was somewhat stocky, of medium height, and, as he humorously said of himself at that time, of "antique appearance."<sup>13</sup> Some thought that he was tender in his great scene with Ophelia (Act III, scene 1); others, that he was merely forceful. Some believed he showed too much levity in the play scene and not enough earnestness. Even his detractors recognized his

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 59

naturalness and ease in the encounters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and few could deny the power of his sonorous voice. Indeed, no one ever complained of being unable to hear him clearly even in the remotest corner of the theatre. Katherine Goodale, who, as the young actress, Kitty Molony, travelled with Booth in 1886-1887, tells how the actor's *Hamlet* went in San Francisco.<sup>14</sup> We may suppose that the audience at Houston—more moderately, of course—responded pretty much as did the playgoers on the West Coast. After telling how they had literally worn themselves out with applause during the performance, they were stunned into silence with the last words of the dying Prince.

“Oh, I die, Horatio—” By now there was not a sound in front. The rest was indeed silence—even after the curtain slowly descended.

Lights go up at once. No one moves out there. The orchestra is playing its Hamlet dirge and then, after complete quiet, reaction sets in. Ladies climb upon their seats, scream out for Booth! Booth! It is refined Bedlam, and then more calls.<sup>15</sup>

Booth last visited Galveston as an associate of Lawrence Barrett in the winter of 1888. Scanty attendance at the McLean-Prescott presentations of *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* (February 3) had led the *News* to observe that perhaps playgoers were saving their money for Booth and Barrett. The scale of prices for seats at the performances of the two stars was posted on February 5. Orchestra and dress circle seats were listed at \$3; balcony, reserved, \$2.50; balcony, unreserved, \$2; gallery, \$1; private boxes holding six, \$25. The players travelled in the private railroad car, *Junius Brutus Booth*, with their manager, Arthur B. Chase, who was empowered to do all the talking to newspaper interviewers. The car, called “a magnificent house on wheels,” had a parlor, library, smoking-room, cook-room,



and sleeping quarters. On one-night stands the congenial and companionable pair ate and slept in the car instead of putting up at a hotel.

The actors opened at the Tremont with *Othello* on February 13. The orchestra had been removed from its accustomed place and seated behind the curtain to make more space for additional patrons. "The muffled tones of the instruments behind the curtain between the acts was not very enlivening," said the *News*, "but was somewhat *en rapport* with the play, one of the least animated of the tragedies." As Iago, Booth came on the stage first, but it was not until the second scene, when he and Barrett appeared together, that the audience seemed to realize what was before them. Tremendous applause followed this realization. Of Booth's fine assumption of this craftiest of all of Shakespere's villains we can perhaps get the clearest impression from the words of a critic who often saw the broader and deeper conception of the actor's last years. Henry A. Clapp has left this interesting study:

The subtle Venetian, still as persuasively frank in speech and manners, as facile and graceful, as before now threw a shadow of baleful blackness as he walked, was Prince of the Power of the Air as he wove and cast the dreadful "net that shall enmesh them all," and in his soliloquies uttered such a voice of unquenchable anguish and hate as might proceed from Satan himself.<sup>16</sup>

Barrett's lack of heroic figure kept him from looking the part of *Othello*, and his studied intellectuality did not seem altogether suitable in a character swayed by the strong emotional impulses that govern the barbaric yet gentle-natured Moor.

On the second evening Booth was seen as the noble Brutus, proving his versatility in an assumption widely contrasting with that of the cunning Venetian. (Barrett's em-

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 61

phasis on Cassius and his understanding of the part will be dealt with later.) The *News* thought Barrett suffered from his association with Booth; and perhaps he did. Booth, on the other hand, profited greatly from the strong support his associate brought with him. There were certainly no "sticks" travelling with the select company.

The coming of the two great actors to Houston was hailed by the *Post* as the most important "histrionic feast" the city had ever known. Barrett was praised for hazarding his reputation in combining with Booth; and every one was pleased that the actors had elected to open with *Julius Caesar* (at the matinee, February 15), in which play the meteor-like and terrible Cassius of the one would stride the stage with the faultless Brutus of the other. There was no heaving of the chest and wringing of the hands in Booth's assumption of the part; the civil strife raging within his bosom was pictured in his face and reflected in his voice. As William Winter said of him: "Booth's Brutus had a gentle melancholy, a sad abstraction, an autumnal pensiveness . . . that rendered its greatness and its beauty less obvious than they would be if he were wholly a man of action." The gentle bearing, the pensive demeanor, and sad face of Brutus held all eyes at the Pillot Opera House from the moment he appeared till his death at Philippi. His dignity (the *Post* declared) paralyzed the wrath of Cassius in the great quarrel scene and his silence at the realization of the death of Portia was eloquent.

Regarding Barrett's depiction of the part that had engaged so much of his attention for years the *Post* had but little to say. Earlier (1883) a critic with this paper had wondered if the player had the "eccentric idea" of making Cassius the principal part in *Julius Caesar*, "morally, and as exposing the narrow pragmatism of Brutus." Did Barrett regard Cassius as the hero of the tragedy, the patriot and conservative

statesman, and Brutus as the blundering aristocrat of the privileged classes who, by his stupidity and imperiousness, defeats the rally made against Caesar? After the showing of the tragedy with Booth it was felt that Barrett's interpretation was conventional, the actor apparently being content chiefly to satisfy the tastes of those who like the work of an artist, whether it be in purple or in carpentry.

In the evening, as Othello, Barrett was free and open-natured enough, and soldierly, but the massiveness and grandeur and brutal vigor with which Salvini invested the role were not within the American's grasp. "One always wished, with Barrett," says Odell, "that he had possessed just that one bit of magnetism that would have carried him into the ranks of the greatest."<sup>17</sup> Of Booth's Iago we can say that it was one of the highest efforts of genius one could have wished for. Towse called it "the incarnation of smooth, eager, supple, and fathomless deviltry."<sup>18</sup> And of the masterly portrayal the *Post* gives this account:

After seeing Booth as Brutus it seemed difficult to reconcile one's belief to the fact that the Brutus of the afternoon was the Iago of the night. In Mr. Booth's Iago may be seen all the cold-blooded villainy, all the sardonic deviltry, all the abominable hypocrisy and all the unrelenting malice that enter into the composition of the basest wretch that ever dramatist conceived. Then again there is the inimitable grace of it all—he brings out the fascinating quality of the rogue—playing in a kind of lurid light through the malignity which steeps his soul.

The Ancient had been one of the triumphs of the great player's father, and from him the son got much of his stage business and ideas to serve as a basis for his own assumption. Both were matchless in the fifth act, which is essentially Iago's. Edwin's impressiveness was unforgettable when he delivered the lines:

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know; From  
this time forth I never will speak word.

## Edwin Booth in Galveston and Houston 63

As he spoke, his face seemed to redden with anger, and then presently to reflect his deep-seated hate, his eyes all the while flashing the secret working of Iago's mind.

The cast of Julius Caesar is subjoined:

Marcus Brutus	Edwin Booth
Cassius	Lawrence Barrett
Mark Antony	E. J. Buckley
Julius Caesar	John A. Lane
Decius Brutus	Charles Collins
Casca	Ben G. Rogers
Octavius Caesar	Lawrence Hanley
Metellus Cimber	L. J. Henderson
Popilius Lena	Frederick Vroom
Titinius	J. L. Finney
Trebonius	Charles B. Hanford
Cinna	Edwin Royle
Soothsayer	Beaumont Smith
Pindarus	Kendall Weston
Servius	Walter Thomas
Flavius	M. C. Stone
First Citizen	Owen Fawcett
Lucius	Miss Miriam Leary
Portia	Minna K. Gale
Calphurnia	Elizabeth Robins

Prices of seats at the *Othello* performance ranged from \$3 for the orchestra and orchestra circle to \$1.50 for the gallery, with boxes quoted at \$15. Pillot's with its eleven hundred seats made its contribution to the \$300,000 in earnings of the Booth-Barrett combination for the season of 1887-1888. Of this sum, Booth himself received \$200,000; Barrett, \$75,000; and manager Arthur B. Chase, \$25,000.

J. S. GALLEGLY

## NOTES

1. On New Year's Day it was announced that Eugene Pillot of Houston had bought the Tremont for \$50,000. At the end of the month he leased the building to L. E. Spencer for \$3600 for the year.
2. "A New Hamlet," *The Theatre* (December 1, 1880), p. 351.
3. The word *nunnery* in the Elizabethan sense, of course, has an unpleasant connotation.
4. Taylor, who had adapted his play from Hugo's *Le Roi s'Amuse* in 1859, fashioned his Bertuccio after both Triboulet and Verdi's Rigoletto, besides adding some bold strokes of his own.
5. *Life and Art of Edwin Booth* (New York, 1893), p. 230.
6. C. E. L. Wingate, *Shakespeare's Heroes on the Stage* (New York, 1896), p. 154.
7. *Sixty Years of the Theater* (New York and London, 1916), Ch. XIII, p. 190.
8. The figures represent a considerable "take" for a city of 28,500 population.
9. The Sunset and Southern Pacific railroads were connected at the Pecos river on January 13, 1883. (*Houston Post*, January 14, 1883.)
10. Katherine Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth*, Chapter XIV.
11. *Ibid.*, Chapter XIII.
12. *Nights at the Play* (London, 1883), p. 424.
13. Edwin Booth, letter to Horace H. Furness, March 13, 1887, as quoted in Edwina Booth Grossmann, *Edwin Booth* (New York, 1902), p. 271.
14. Goodale, *op. cit.*, Ch. XXIII, p. 182.
15. "My tour through Texas, in the private car, 'David Garrick,' was, on the whole, very pleasant. The towns are all worth a visit as embryo cities of wealth and beauty; the theatres excellent, hotels ditto, and the audiences very cultured and in full dress." (Edwin Booth, *loc. cit.*)
16. *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic* (Boston, 1902), XV, 136.
17. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1942), XIII, 22.
18. John Ranken Towse, *op. cit.*, Ch. XIII, p. 190.