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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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<http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth

Abstract

Often regarded as the premiere American Shakespearean actor of the late nineteenth century, Edwin Booth (1833-1893) distinguished himself as an interpreter of Hamlet through his exceptional ability to bring his experience from life to art. From the beginning of his career, in the 1850s, he brought Shakespeare to the American scene going beyond the boundaries of the English tradition; in performing the character of the Prince of Denmark, he paved the way for a new era in American theatre. After an initial struggle to find his acting style, he became a star, from the moment he first played Hamlet in New York in 1857, through his legendary 'hundred nights Hamlet' in 1864-1865, to his farewell performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1891. Starting from the broader perspective of how Shakespeare entered American culture from the end of the 18th century on, the aim of this paper is to focus on Edwin Booth as one of the most acclaimed performers on the American stage and one of the most significant example of the actor-managers – from the Hallams to Edwin Forrest, and the Booths, who emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century to largely replace the itinerant stars – who played such an important part in bringing Shakespeare to America.

KEYWORDS: American theatre; Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Edwin Booth

1. Shakespeare in America

There are a variety of factors at play in the emergence of Shakespeare on the other side of the Atlantic, since, at least at the beginning, the stories of the published texts and of the performance of the plays run their own separate ways. Shakespeare was part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the first colonists, but they were the same seventeenth-century Puritans who left England to avoid, among other things, Renaissance drama (Dobson 1996, 189). While on the one hand it is not likely that the first English travelers took with them a copy of a drama or a poem, on the other hand it is true that they spoke Shakespeare's language in all its variety and vitality, a language that would survive better in the New World than in the Old (Cabot Lodge 1885, 256). The history of the circulation of Shakespeare's texts in the colonies began approximately at the end of the seventeenth

* University of Bari – cristina.consiglio@uniba.it

century, when parts of his plays were published in anthologies of poems as examples of poetry and rhetoric. In the same years, a few copies of the *folios* made their appearance in the private libraries of landowners and gentlemen and between the 1720s and the 1740s the universities of Harvard and Yale had a complete series of Shakespeare's plays on their shelves. In other words, in the territories of New England Shakespeare was read before being acted, to avoid the idea of corruption connected to the idea of the performance. The second half of the eighteenth-century, in New York, Virginia and North Carolina, saw the first theatrical productions thanks to certain English companies of actors importing the art of theatre from their motherland, such as the London Company of Comedians, which Lewis Hallam brought from London to Williamsburg in 1752 to stage *The Merchant of Venice*, usually considered to be the first professional performance of Shakespeare in America.¹

In the eighteenth-century, Shakespearean texts and performances had different audiences; a less educated or simply a more heterogeneous and rather noisy public went to see the plays, often – just like the Elizabethans – without any knowledge of the texts, as books containing the plays were not readily accessible. As the English visitor Frances Trollope noted in 1832 “the applause is expressed by cries and thumping with the feet, instead of clapping” (Levine 1988, 25); a more educated public would have read the Bard's soliloquies and speeches in their quiet closets, peacefully sitting in their armchairs.²

It is equally true that what reached the stage were the earliest appropriations of Shakespeare, a ‘Shakespeare improved’, as it was defined, shorter versions of the original plays from which full scenes were omitted, some characters forgotten, sexual references rendered more palatable and the tragic endings replaced by unlikely reconciliations. It was a Shakespeare

¹ There are records of some earlier Shakespeare performances, though very little is known about them. In 1730 a jocular New York physician named Joachimus Bertrand advertised that he was about to play the Apothecary in an amateur performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. In March and April 1750 *Richard III* (Colley Cibber's version) was staged in New York by a company headed by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean, who would later take their repertory into Maryland and Virginia. In December 1751 Robert Hupton, a man who had been sent to New York in advance of the Hallam company to serve as their agent but then set up on his own, performed *Othello*.

² The first American-produced copies of Shakespeare's complete works were published in Philadelphia in 1795, only twelve years after the end of the War of Independence, but 172 years after the First Folio appeared in London. Shakespeare was available to American citizens in eight duodecimo volumes for the price of one dollar each. While the title maintained that the edition was ‘Corrected from the Latest and Best London Editions’, the ‘Preface’ and ‘The Life of the Author’ were both written by an American living in Philadelphia and dated 1 July 1795 (Sturgess 2014, 60-1).

presented as integrated into the culture they enjoyed, a more familiar and intimate version of the original, though always faithful to the vividness of his characters and perfectly in accord with a nation that placed the individual at the center of the universe. “Learned and wealthy colonials gradually became more aware of Shakespeare’s plays” and “a number of amateur actors informally performed Shakespeare in several American cities” (Sturgess 2014, 55). From the first documented American performance of a Shakespearean play in the 1750s until the closing of the theatres during the American Revolution in 1774, the Bard was already the most popular playwright in the colonies. After the Revolution he was still the most widely performed dramatist in an increasing number of cities and towns (Levine 1988, 16).

In the nineteenth century things started to change as the worlds of the published texts and the stage began to converge, giving life to a deep and longstanding experience with Shakespeare, “based upon the language and eloquence, the artistry and humor, the excitement and action, the moral sense and the worldview that Americans found in Shakespearean drama” (45).

Shakespeare’s plays were published in American editions, his works taught in school and colleges as declamation and rhetoric, they became part of university programs; allusions and quotations were a regular feature of nineteenth-century newspapers. In the meantime, in contrast with the previous century, when several English actors came to the New world to seek their fortune in a less sophisticated environment than London – in what Shattuck called “the westward flow of Shakespearean actors” (1976, 31) –, now the new generations were starting to establish themselves as professional performers and skillful and tireless managers, gaining fame and financial rewards in return for their efforts. Books had become a new vehicle for disseminating Shakespeare, but the stage remained the primary instrument. Wherever there was an audience for the theater, there his plays were performed frequently and prominently, amid a full range of contemporary entertainments.

2. Edwin Booth’s Early Career

Against this promising background, the premier American Shakespearean actor of the closing decades of the 19th century emerged: Edwin Booth (1833-1893)³ was one of the first performers to cross the United States from

³ More than one biography of Edwin Booth has been written. The first was *Life and Art of Edwin Booth* by William Winter, published in 1893, a more extended version of a text published in 1872 when Booth was still alive, soon to be followed by *Edwin Booth:*

East to West and back, and to gain international recognition. His exceptional acting qualities actually reveal only one of the aspects that make his story remarkable. He committed himself to becoming a good performer but at the same time he moved the American theatre forward, playing his roles in a more subtle and intellectualized fashion than most of the other leading actors of the first half of the century had and improving the style and the scenery of the theatrical productions. The experience of Edwin Booth can be read as a subjective synthesis of the history of Shakespeare both in the stage and in published form in the United States: as a result of his experience on the stage, he became aware of the need to capture on paper, in his notes and letters, thoughts and reflections on how tradition was changing and improving. He thus paved the way for a new era in American theatre, which was both grateful to the past and ready to free itself from it.

Booth was a rather small man and by no means of the heroic school. He was shy, somber, and retiring in company. In terms of technique, however, he was probably the finest actor of his time, and certainly he was the most celebrated and the best loved. He was not versatile, had no talent for general comedy and he did not have an aptitude to play lovers and most comic characters, but he was capable of sardonic humor and emotional intensity.

He was the son of Junius Brutus Booth, an eccentric, who in 1821 left

Recollections by His Daughter Edwina Booth Grossmann, and Letters to Her and to His Friends, published in 1894. Another biography written during Booth's life is the one by his sister Asia Booth Clarke entitled *The Elder and the Younger Booth*, published in 1882. The most recent ones are the best-seller *Prince of Players: Edwin Booth* by Eleanor Ruggles, published in 1953 and *Edwin Booth: A Bio-Bibliography* by L. Terry Oggel in 1992. Very recently another interesting and detailed work has been written by Arthur B. Bloom, *Edwin Booth: A Biography and Performance History* (2013), the result of extremely thorough research of "letters, promptbooks, financial records, broadsides, playbills, newspaper advertisements, reviews, extant costumes and books and magazines from that period" (Bloom 2013, 1). In my opinion, his daughter's recollections and Oggel's chapter about Booth's *Biographical Sketches* are maybe the most direct and personal accounts of his life (together with the work by William Winter and the words of praise written by his co-star Lawrence Barrett in 1886), while the more recent works provide a more faithful portrait of the actor and of the man. Other biographical studies are: C. Townsend Copeland, *Edwin Booth* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1901); R. Lockridge, *Darling of Misfortune: Edwin Booth 1833-1893* (New York: Century Company, 1932); S. Kimmel, *The Mad Booths of Maryland* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1940; rev. ed., New York: Dover, 1969). See also: K. Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931); C.H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); D.J. Watermeier, *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); C.H. Shattuck, "The Theatrical Management of Edwin Booth", in *The Theatrical Manager in England and America*, ed. J.W. Donohue (Princeton University Press, 1971).

England to settle in the United States. There he had three sons who would, like him, take up an acting career, Edwin, Junius Brutus Jr and John Wilkes, who would be sadly remembered for being the murderer of Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

The beginning of the youngest Booth's career on stage was in the West. Edwin went to California with his father, Junius Brutus the Elder, in the summer of 1852. They arrived in San Francisco in July. Late that summer, when they were in Sacramento, Edwin was able to take his first professional benefit. When his father saw him dressed in tragic blacks, he exclaimed "You look like Hamlet" (Shattuck 1969, 3). Whether this was intended as a prediction is impossible to know. In the same way that the name of Sarah Siddons recalls the character of Lady Macbeth or Edmund Kean is Othello, as metaphors of dramatic perfection, there is no doubt that in the history of the American theatre Edwin Booth's name will be inextricably linked to the Prince of Denmark, from his first appearance as Hamlet in San Francisco in 1853 to the last in 1891.

About forty years of performances, full of changes and evolutions, were characterized by a word that the drama critics used from the beginning to describe Booth's art: *flexibility*. Echoing Hazlitt's words quoted by Ferdinand Ewer in his first review of a performance in California, the young actor brought to the stage "all the easy motion and peaceful curves of a wave of the sea". In Ewer's words, "Booth's Hamlet puts to the blush any attempt in the same character we have seen in California"; in terms of portrayal it was superior even to the Hamlet of his late great father. The young critic claimed that Booth had perfectly realized his ideal:

Melancholy without gloom, contemplative yet without misanthropy, philosophical yet enjoying playfulness in social converse, a man by himself yet with ardent feelings of friendship, a thorough knower of human nature, Hamlet stands the type of all that is firm, dignified, gentlemanly and to be respected in a man.

(Shattuck 1967, 21)

Maybe Booth did not understand what Ewer meant. At the beginning of his career he just behaved like young bachelor: he gambled, drank too much, and got involved with women. He played what he had to play, developing his skills and his popularity with the public as best he could. If an actor's stage characters were reflections of his own personal character, the quiet, introspective, refined quality of his acting was but an extension of his own personal modesty, pensiveness, and gentility. Although a versatile actor, except in his portrayals of lovers and most comic characters, he was at his best in the portrayal of brooding, melancholy characters like Brutus and Hamlet, and of lively histrionic characters like Richelieu and Iago.

Undoubtedly his greatest creation and the one most reflective of his own personality was his Hamlet. Dark, melancholy, lyrical, shadowy but not vague, repeatedly reworked into an external form that was apparently simple yet actually rich in nuance, spiritual but intensively alive, Booth's Hamlet, like some of Albert Pinkham Ryder's haunting paintings⁴, created an atmosphere, as the American dramatic critic William Winter once wrote, of "dread sublimity and awe" (Watermeier 1971, 12). When Booth first played the role for which he would become most celebrated,⁵ his youth was a barrier to imparting the proper weight and dignity to the character. Though there were "a few disagreeable faults in intonation and delivery", the review that appeared in the *Alta* of 26 April predicted "a high degree of success for the promising young artist" (Watermeier 2005, 84).

When Booth returned east in 1856, *Hamlet* was in his repertory, but only incidentally. In Booth's first performances it was possible to discern traces of the London tragic school; the young man's training in elocution reflected the general turning away among orators and actors from mechanical theories of expression to a new concept of naturalness. Booth moved on from the ranting style of his father's generation of actors to a more natural delivery. At the same time, audiences were looking for something more refined, and theatre entertainment was developing into an essential part of American city life. The question of realism in the theatre would become the central issue in American drama for the next twenty-five years. A conflict of opinion arose from the ancient antithesis of 'nature' and 'art'. It was a question that had been debated in America by the followers of Edwin Forrest and Charles Macready in the 1840s and 1850s, and of Edwin Forrest and Edwin Booth in the 1860s and 1870s (Kinne 1954, 11).

Between 1856 and 1857 Booth met the actress Mary Devlin, the woman whom he would marry soon after. They performed together in New York, Boston, Baltimore and Richmond and she gave him useful advice about per-

⁴ Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917) was an American painter; his visionary, romantic and highly imaginative paintings were dominated by literature and religion. He rebelled against the traditional discipline and abandoned realistic painting; his human figures are embedded in nature, their posture and gestures hardly distinguishable from their setting.

⁵ On April 25, 1853, Booth played Hamlet for the first time, before an all-male audience of demonstrative frontiersmen. The men of the Gold Rush prided themselves on their connoisseurship in literature and the arts, and especially in the art of acting. To a man they had been admirers of Booth's father, Junius Brutus Booth, who only a few months before had given his last performance for them before going back to east to die. The *Hamlet* night seems to have been a triumph from the beginning. It was reviewed by Ferdinand Ewer, a young man himself, intelligent, sensitive, educated in literature and philosophy at Harvard College, and alert to the coming spirit of the age, who became Booth's first prophet (Shattuck 1966, 1-14).

forming: she could see that theatrical tastes were shifting towards elegance. The outsized, heavily masculine style of the 'old school' was on its way out. Mary Devlin helped Booth find his level and he learned to capitalize on his swift body, musical voice, and glowing eyes. In New York he also met Adam Badeau, a brilliant young litterateur, who was one of his greatest admirers⁶ and helped Booth to repair the gaps in his education. In 1860, after a two-year absence from the New York stage, he performed his 'new' Hamlet.

He was the first actor of the American stage to dare to deliver a Hamlet soliloquy sitting in a chair⁷ and then, in the midst of it, get up and walk to another position. A.C. Sprague pointed out that an English actor had sat for the soliloquy as early as 1854, while Booth had introduced this touch of 'realism' in the early 1860s. By 1870 the expedient no longer occasioned surprise. Nonetheless, on 7 January 1880 the critic of the *Times* praised the free use of seats from which to deliver the soliloquies for giving variety to the scene, and two days later the critic of the *World* noted that "the impulsive and unpremeditated negligence of attitude was superior to the delivery of the passage in oratorical style" (Shattuck 1969, 187).

In a discussion with Henry Tuckerman of New York, on the character of *Hamlet*, that gentleman, who had witnessed many of the old actors, observed to Booth that they all stood during the soliloquies, and inquired if it were not possible to alter this. On the next representation of 'Hamlet', Booth, seated, began the soliloquy 'To be or not to be.' Mr Tuckerman, watching the play, could not conceive how *Hamlet* could rise from that chair with propriety and grace. When at the words, 'to sleep, perchance to dream', after an instant of reflection, during which the mind of *Hamlet* had penetrated the eternal darkness vivid with dreams, he rose with the horror of that terrible 'perchance' stamped upon his features, continuing, 'Ay, there's the rub!' His friend was satisfied that the actor had caught the inspiration of the lines in the reflective pause (Booth Clarke 1882, 153-4).

In later stagings the chair used for the soliloquy stood to the left of the center table; Booth walked over to it and sank into it, silent, one hand at his temple, his face was taut with the concentrated working of his mind. The

⁶ In 1859 Badeau wrote in *The Vagabond*: "Edwin Booth has made me know what tragedy is. He has displayed to my eyes an entirely new field; he has opened to me the door to another and exquisite delight; he has shown me the possibilities of tragedy. Though he has not yet done all that he has pointed at, there are moments in his acting in which he is full of the divine fire, in which the animation that clothes him as with a garment, the halo of genius that surrounds him, not only recalls what I have not of others; not only suggests, but incarnates and embodies my highest notions of tragedy" (Clarke Booth 1882, 68).

⁷ Only a minor English actor, Henry Nicholls, had sat while delivering "To be or not to be" several years earlier.

audience seemed to feel that the man was alone with his thoughts, and that they were far removed from his consideration. Booth's rising at exactly the moment when he pronounces 'there's the rub' is marked in all the prompt-books, with his left hand drawn up to his breast.

The new pose is shown in photographs and paintings where Booth is portrayed sitting in an ornate chair, in a contemplative pose that was copied by other actors. It was a ground-breaking move when Booth first made it. For the audience of the time, his Hamlet was physical and startling, so it is ironic now that one of his most famous images depicts him 'at rest'. From Booth's promptbook, we get a view of a restless, tortured Hamlet; sitting for the 'suicide speech', although merely an outward sign of the Hamlet Booth created, put the emphasis on Hamlet's inner struggles. Outwardly unfailingly polite, princely, mournful, and thoughtful, other images of him in the role show his hand nearly always at his heart, a Hamlet torn by love and duty.

"Booth also introduced sitting on the tomb in the graveyard when, with his face half buried on *Horatio's* shoulder, he speaks as if to his own heart, the words 'What! the fair Ophelia?' His resting previously on the tomb is most natural and graceful, and, imbued with these qualities, it cannot fail to be effective." (154) As regards the 'graveyard scene' it is also worth remembering that Booth put less emphasis on the memory of Yorick than he did on the memory of his father. He undoubtedly wanted to remember his servant but he rather quickly got rid of Yorick's skull, while in the ghost scenes, at the end of the first act, he would fall to the ground and weep with such realism that he was criticized for being 'obscene' for revealing such private grief so completely.

The approval garnered in New York encouraged Booth to open his horizons and in 1861 he decided to travel to Europe, together with his wife and daughter. He played his major roles in London, Liverpool, and Manchester and when he returned to America he was acclaimed as an international star. When he reopened the Winter Garden with his Hamlet in 1863, he had risen above the implied rivalry with his father, but now he found himself compared with Edwin Forrest, his father's contemporary. Forrest's style was distinctly masculine and loud. Booth's quieter style and his intriguing good looks – his dark eyes, his black curly hair, and his slight build –, won over the public.

Booth believed that the arts were steadily arriving at a peak of perfection, there to be fixed, and consolidated against decay. Just as his friend Horace Howard Furness of Philadelphia was gathering into his *New Variorum* volumes all that past wisdom from study could teach about Shakespeare, so Booth was ensuring the conservation of the art of theatre. The canon of his theatre was the noblest of the so-called Standard Drama. This

meant, first of all, the ‘best’ of Shakespeare, checking the texts through the many editions back to the First Folio, then trimming them into conformity with theatrical requirements and approved modern taste; and when he published them in his Prompt-book edition, he imagined that these versions would serve the profession for generations to come. He then started to work on another project, the recovery of the texts of the Shakespearean plays that had been altered by other editors – like *Richard III* by Colley Cibber or *King Lear* by Nahum Tate – and the issue of new editions of them. Booth published two sets of his promptbooks over the next two decades.

As far as his *Hamlet* was concerned, he did not properly ‘restore’ it for *Hamlet* had never been rewritten. He concentrated the text around his main character more than any other actor-manager had done before. His acting version was 2750 lines long,⁸ only about 220 longer than the commonly used acting version printed in the *Modern Standard Drama*. Though accurate, this version proved to be too long. From Booth’s later promptbooks we learn that he shortened the opening scene by having the Ghost enter only once, he omitted the first forty lines of “Now I am alone”, he shortened the *Mousetrap* and dropped several other lines from the Laertes-King conspiracy. In a further reduction the opening scene was not performed at all, along with Hamlet’s Advice to the Players, and the scene where the King sends Hamlet to England was omitted while many lines were cut from the soliloquies. The operation of restoration of the text consisted also in cleansing it of its “burden of filth-lines”, in accordance with Booth’s image of Hamlet as a most delicate and exquisitely refined creature, surely not accustomed to such rough talk. For the same reason, in the dialogue with his mother he limited himself to arousing her sense of shame without

⁸ “Exactly as Booth’s predecessors had done, he omitted the entire ‘outside story’ of the Norwegian wars, and thereby the coming of Fortinbras and the great soliloquy ‘How all occasions do inform against me’. He deprived Laertes and Polonius of about 40 lines of their advice to Ophelia. He omitted the ‘dram of eale’ speech. In the second act he dropped Reynaldo, much of the amusing small talk between Hamlet and his old school friends, all the topical discussion of the plight of the players, and much of the ‘rugged Pyrrhus’ stuff. He cut most of Hamlet’s dialogue with Ophelia during the Play scene and much of the *Mousetrap* dialogue. He cut about 70 lines from the scene between Hamlet and his mother. In the fourth act he economized far beyond his predecessors, omitting scene 1, 2, 4, and 6 entirely and reducing the whole act by nearly 300 lines. In the fifth act he dropped 50 lines from the Osric scene and the entrance of ‘a Lord’. His restorations include many small and mostly not significant scraps. The inclusion of Polonius’ advice to Laertes (25 lines) can hardly be counted as a Booth restoration, for although it is not printed in the *Modern Standard Drama* version, most producers from at least Macready’s time had included it. He restored the King’s Prayer scene and Hamlet’s ‘Not I might do it pat’ soliloquy (64 lines). He restored to the fifth act Hamlet’s narrative of his sea-adventures (74 lines)” (Shattuck 1969, xvi-xvii).

accusing her and always avoided lines like “let the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest”. Furthermore, the sexual imagery was almost totally eliminated: When Booth’s Hamlet decided to murder the King, he did not refer to “the incestuous pleasure of his bed”, nor did he threaten Ophelia or mention that Strumpet Dame Fortune to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is necessary to remember that most of the sexual elements had already been cut in Garrick’s time, so Booth was not the only one to remove them, but surely in any event he would not have restored them. What Booth’s text most lacked was Hamlet’s savagery, the ferocious anger, the cruelty, the ribaldry. American society in those decades was aspiring, at times frantically, even comically, to gentility. It took Hamlet for its ideal and its Hamlet had to be irreproachable (Shattuck 1967, 36). He also introduced a pleasant Christian touch near the end of the first scene, for an audience that had not altogether forgotten the old association of playhouse and sin. Booth himself believed in the idealized, gentlemanized Hamlet of his acting version and he rarely looked at or remembered the parts he had left out.

Booth sought to do for the classics in America what such major English actors as Charles Kean and Macready had done in London in the 1850s: by going into management after years of starring on the stage. Though not comparable either to the simplicity of the Elizabethan scenes that merely suggested the situation or to the ‘historical accuracy’ that the art of the cinema would later take, he put on splendid productions that benefitted from authoritative research, such as his successful 1864-1865 *Hamlet* with a perfect combination of mechanical and artistic resources, including stage decorations, massive stone stairways, that distant blue above them, and blocks of stones in the ceiling of the palace. The period in which he set the play was tenth-century Denmark, evoked with walls of stone blocks, heavy columns and round arches decorated with zig-zags. As Shattuck underlined, in general tone and in many details Booth’s production of *Hamlet* would have reminded a modern audience Lawrence Olivier’s black-and-white *Hamlet* movie (1967, 37).

As for other remarkable productions, his 1869 *Romeo and Juliet* lavishly captured Italian streets, sunny gardens and cypress-shaded precincts, and in the opening Grand Square scene of his 1871 *Julius Caesar* there were the facades of a dozen splendid buildings facing the square and rising awesomely against the background of the Roman hills, while for the Senate Chamber scene Booth made use of the extreme height of his stage to create the appearance of a high barrel-vaulted ceiling and, beyond that, a long hallway of similar vaults separating a series of domes.

3. The Challenging 1860s

By the summer of 1864 Booth could claim mastery of several Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean roles and his importance as an actor was unquestionable. One of the outstanding moments of his career was the theatrical enterprise that made him famous, known to history as ‘the great Shakespearean event of the country’: a hundred consecutive nights performing *Hamlet*. This remarkable season began in November 26, 1864 and ended on March 22, 1865, a record broken only by yet another season of *Hamlet*⁹ in 1923 (Sturgess 2014, 16). The production was well staged, excellently cast, and secured the fame of Edwin Booth as the *Hamlet par excellence* of the American stage. No such revival of a Shakespearean play had taken place since the days of Charles Kean, at the Old Park. No one envisaged a lengthy run when it began and before long Booth became tired and bored with it, calling its success “terrible”. But he had supervised the effort to make a grand production of the play – with new scenes and costumes, and fresh actors to support him – and the press so raved about its excellence that the co-manager William Stuart would not let Booth stop before it reached its hundredth performance.

The press was admiring of the beauty and completeness of the production, asserting that for the first time in America the play was brought out “with due regard to the external effect” (Shattuck 1968, 55). Booth’s 1864 *Hamlet* was one of the first successful attempts by an American actor-manager to put on an “historically accurate” production.¹⁰ The acting version which Booth settled on in 1864 can be found in the edition which Booth gave Henry Hinton permission to bring out in 1866, an edition illustrated with engravings from the scenery of the play. The engravings faithfully mirrored the splendor of the scenery of the Winter Garden Theatre just before it was destroyed in a fire in 1867, together with everything Booth owned for the theatrical productions, costumes, sets, books, and props. He then devoted time, energies, and ideas to the building of a new theatre, called Booth’s Theatre after him, equipped with the newest machinery for operating the *mise-en-scènes*. Booth got Charles Witham to draw up six

⁹ Thirty years after he died, during the furor over John Barrymore’s *Hamlet*, a group of aging Booth devotees called upon Barrymore in his dressing room to beg him stop his run of the play on the ninety-ninth night. Their ‘great master’ had played it for one hundred nights, and his record must not be broken. Barrymore pretended he had never heard of Booth’s Hundred Nights and declared then and there that he would play *Hamlet* one hundred nights plus one (Shattuck 1969, xv).

¹⁰ Later followed by his 1866 *Richelieu*, his 1867 *Merchant of Venice* and many other plays.

scenes exactly as they were staged and then converted these drawings into engravings. This was another way in which he outdid Charles Kean, who had published his own acting versions without illustrations.

Three weeks after the hundredth *Hamlet*, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln.¹¹ The entire Booth family came under suspicion. Booth wrote a letter of abject apology to the people of the nation dissociating himself and his family from “this most foul and atrocious crime” (perhaps paraphrasing the line pronounced by the ghost of Hamlet’s father) and announcing that he would retire from acting, bearing “a wounded name”. Following the assassination Booth did not return to the stage till January 1866, when he opened at the Winter Garden with *Hamlet* again, followed by *Richelieu* and, in early 1867, by *The Merchant of Venice*. Public affection for him was stronger than ever. In March 1867 another tragedy occurred: the Winter Garden burned down, and all the work of the previous three years was lost.

For the next two years Booth toured the eastern half of the country, acting to raise money for his new enterprise: building a new theatre, his own theatre. He opened it in February 1869, with a stunning production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the audience were hundreds of prominent citizens who saw in this theatrical palace the fulfilment of their own sense of the ideal. The productions were a great attraction. The spectacular sets were made possible by innovative devices employing the latest technology. Several of the designs were by Booth himself. In all, Booth presented eight major productions of Shakespearean plays – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *Richard III* in addition to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Several other plays were also staged in resplendent productions in this theatre with its permanent repertory company, where all the leading actors of the time and of later generations could perform.

¹¹ On the evening of April 14, 1865, at the Ford Theatre in Washington, while watching *Our American Cousin* by Tom Taylot, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by Booth. After shooting Lincoln and stabbing Major Henry R. Rathbone, Booth jumped from the presidential box onto the stage, where he then turned to face his audience. Walt Whitman, writing as a New York journalist, described the Shakespearean quality of the event for his readers: “Booth, the murderer, dress’d in plain black broadcloth, bare-headed, with full, glossy, raven hair, his eyes like some mad animal’s flashing with light and resolution, yet with a certain strange calmness, holds aloft in one hand a large knife – walks along not much back from the footlights – turns fully towards the audience his face of statuesque beauty, lit by those basilisk eyes, flashing with desperation, perhaps insanity – launches out in a firm and steady voice the words *Sic Semper Tyrannis* – and then walks with neither slow nor very rapid pace diagonally across to the back of the stage, and disappears” (Sturgess 2014, 127-8).

4. Homages to Hamlet

Soon after, in 1870, the most detailed account we have of one of Booth's performances of Hamlet was written, a real act of homage to both dramatist and actor by Charles W. Clarke, a bookkeeper and correspondent in New York. He had learned the play of *Hamlet* word for word and he knew it all by heart. He went to see it acted by Edwin Booth and was so struck by the depth and beauty of it that he went to see it seven more times. He therefore attended eight performances of Hamlet, the first was on January 18, 1870, and the last probably on March 19. He made a study of *Hamlet's* plot and characters and recognized all the variants between the well-known Cowden Clarke text¹² and Booth's version. He memorized the play word for word, and repeated passages to himself to test the meaning of the lines and decide for himself the correct accents and inflections. He read reviews of Booth's performances and studied every criticism of the play that he had access to. During the summer and probably the autumn too, his notes developed into what is most likely the fullest record of Booth's performance in existence. It is contained in an old journal,¹³ written "in a minute handwriting remarkable for uniformity, grace, and legibility" (Bundy 1951, 100). He must have written the whole of it more than once, for the manuscript has very few insertions or corrections. Every scene was recreated for the reader, it was not the generalized impression of a somewhat emotional spectator but a keen record of every aspect of Booth's performance, he described the scenery, the audience and the theatre, before moving on to the setting and the costumes, as well as Booth's gestures, postures, and even his pronunciations, his rising and falling inflections. His method was to mention sets and surroundings only briefly, but to describe the appearance of Booth's Hamlet exhaustively; to report the words of other characters only enough to give Hamlet his cues or to keep the sense going, but to record every word of Hamlet's speeches and to explicate them with succinct notation of sound and accompanying action. At the end of each scene or important passage, he paused to generalize upon Booth's act-

¹² William Shakespeare's works, edited with a revision of the text by both Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, two prominent Shakespearean scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These volumes contain all of Shakespeare's plays and his poems. The Cowden Clarks are known for several critical texts on Shakespeare. These include *Shakespeare Characters*, *Complete Concordance of Shakespeare* and *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. The aforementioned concordance was Mary Cowden Clarke's greatest work. She released the work, which was begun in 1829, in eighteen monthly parts, and it was eventually published in 1844-1845.

¹³ The manuscript is now conserved in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

ing, to interpret the broader meaning of a scene, or sometimes to enter an objection. To give an instance of his extremely thorough account, here is the description of one of the most iconic moments of the play:

Ghost enters at right rear. Hamlet does not see it, being faced toward in the right front and looking down. Horatio sees it and starts back. '*Horatio*. Look my lord, it comes!' Hamlet rouses as from some idea that had suddenly laid hold of him, and turns; confronts the ghost who stands quite near him: staggers back, raising his left hand swiftly as if to clear his eyes and by means throws off his bonnet, which hangs behind his neck as he declines: sinks into Horatio's arms at left centre, and says in a whisper (of fear) 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!' (Ghost pauses between right centre and right front. Hamlet leans against Horatio but still stands, and stares at the ghost, breathing hard).

(101)

Another iconic moment is undoubtedly the beginning of the 'To be or not to be' speech, delivered sitting on a chair, as already pointed out earlier:

To be, or (broad sound) not (slight pause) to be (subdued, searching voice; looking down and forward, with a sad, puzzled look), that is the question (free, almost colloquial delivery, yet very sober tones; his voice falls). Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer (slowly, the voice rising a little) the sling and arrows of outrageous fortune; or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing, end them? (he nods his head a little, and his hand slips up his temple to rest on the top of his forehead). To die? (the voice rises) – to sleep (the voice falls perplexedly) – no more (the voice very low and doubtfully conclusive; he shakes his head a trifle). And (upward accent) by a sleep (upward accents) to say we end the heart-ache (slowly and thoroughly pronounced; tone of speculation) and the thousand (slight upward accent in thous-, falling in -and) natural shocks that flesh is heir to (the voice drops in to) – 'tis is (he lifts himself to a more upright posture and his right hand gradually sinks from his temple to his breast) consummation devoutly to be wished (his voice falls; he looks upward for an instant, gives a slight outward toss of his right hand, and then brings it back to his breast). To die (tone of reflection and perplexity) – to sleep (slight upward accent and interrogatory tone; prolonged; he draws his head back a little, his brows contract, and his eyes start quickly with a new idea). To sleep! (slowly, but in an exclamatory tone; he draws back his right hand at his breast) perchance to dream – (upward accent). Ay (he sits back in the chair), there's the rub.

(Shattuck 1969, 188)

The version of Hamlet that Charles W. Clarke saw performed was perhaps the most clearly defined and satisfying of all the versions that Booth played

throughout his life and career. He studied the role very intensively and colored it with different nuances from his own experiences of life. In 1870 he was in his mid-thirties and at the height of his creativity – though shaken by strokes of misfortune, from his first wife's death in 1863 to the Winter Garden fire in 1867 – and his Hamlet burned inwardly with fierce excitement, giving shape to a tragic pattern firmly conceived and worked out in passion.

Booth's Hamlet then grew old with him. With the passing years the character of the Prince of Denmark became more meditative and stoical and less agonized and active. In his early fifties his Hamlet anticipated his own doom as if he was aware of the end of the story from the very beginning.

Booth's Hamlet was entirely sane. He could break out wildly now and then, but this was just for "the very intensity of moral excitement". His motto for the role and his answer to the question whether Hamlet is mad was that "I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft", as he wrote beneath an etching of himself in the character of the Prince of Denmark. To prove that Hamlet's 'antic disposition' was just 'play-acting', Booth suggested comparing Hamlet's mad scenes to those of Ophelia or of Lear, where the madness is real.

In his *Notebook* Booth also emphasizes Hamlet's extraordinary intelligence, through the way he anticipates the moves of the other characters and how he decides upon any plan of action well before he puts it to work. At every moment in the play, except of course when he murders Polonius and when he is under the spell of his father's spirit, he is in command of events. Few Hamlets have been more clear-headed, displaying so much sanity and intelligence. There was no mystery in Booth's Hamlet, as there was no mystery in Shakespeare's words, according to the accounts of both Lawrence Barrett, Booth's friend and partner, and Booth himself.

In another significant review, in December 1880, in the pages of the journal *Theatre*, Palgrave Simpson underlined how in his performance Booth was no slave to tradition, constantly eschewing traditional touches. He wrote that one of the most notable examples is at the moment when his Hamlet exults after the Play scene, not waiting until the crowd had wholly dispersed, or when he utters with profound contempt for the ranting of Laertes the words "I'll rant as well as thou". He gave the play a new rendering, an admirable freshness and brought new feeling to the protagonist's relation to Ophelia. Palgrave Simpson also stated that his Prince of Denmark is "grateful in his courtesy and gentlemanly in his condescension" and one of the most tender moments is when he utters "Go to a nunnery" as the warning advice of a man who really loved Ophelia, not as an indignant denunciation (Booth Clarke 1882, 73). Even in Clarke's account we

find evidence of Hamlet's tenderness. The description of the scene following the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy shows how Booth's Hamlet changed his behavior as the King and Polonius entered the scene; in his Notebook Booth says that "he acts the rest of this scene with Ophelia principally for the King" (Shattuck 1969, 190). At the beginning of the scene he walked quickly and quietly towards her and bowed to her with gentle deference. When she asked him coldly "How does your honor for this many a day?", Hamlet was disconcerted and there was a tinge of sadness in his words to her. The hidden presence of the King and Polonius made Hamlet act and speak more bitterly and sometimes abruptly until the moment when he pronounced, resolutely but mournfully, the words "I loved you not" (192). Nonetheless, he continued talking to her, taking her left hand in his right hand and holding it to his breast. At the end of the scene he paused at the exit, came quickly down to her and, bending over, took her right hand and pressed his lips firmly to it. Then very gently he took her cheeks in his hands and looked earnestly down into her eyes. "Booth's face exhibited several emotions in turn, doubt, then tenderness and pity, then love" (196). Clarke observed that the scene with Ophelia was one of the most difficult for the actor playing Hamlet because he had to maintain the character of a cultivated gentleman and also reveal clearly the complicated motives for his actions, to show at the same time that he loved Ophelia and was suspicious of her. His mental struggle was intense but Booth's skill at playing the part of the madman was so remarkable that the audience was always made aware that his madness was assumed and not real.

5. The Final Years

In 1873, due to problems of financial mismanagement, Booth lost his theatre. As a result he decided not to produce plays again, but only to act his own roles, using his own acting versions. Booth played Hamlet throughout the United States, and especially in the 1870s and 1880s people came to the cities from miles around to see him. Hamlet was the role with which he was most identified, in which people loved him best. It became a national institution, a legend, in the time when the very concept of the starring tragedian was slowly fading away. Booth was, for America, the final major artist of his kind, who brought two centuries of tradition to a culmination but also to an end.

In 1880 he then toured in England, Austria, and Germany. He was following the advice of his friends, among them William Winter, to visit Europe again, though he had declined an invitation two years earlier because he did not want to be set up as the 'leading American tragedian' in rival-

ry with the 'leading English tragedian' Henry Irving, who had played his *Hamlet* for two hundred nights. Two years later his attitude towards performing in England had changed, however, and on November 6, he opened his London engagements as Hamlet at Walter Gooch's completely rebuilt Princess's Theatre. The reception of the London critics was generally judicious and polite, but not enthusiastic. During the next few days, several critics – from the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Chronicle* – reported on Booth's performance. One found it "scholarly and intelligent", another noted that Booth occasionally fell into "artificial grooves" and showed "exaggerated vehemence" in some scenes, another again complained that he looked "as if he had stepped out of an old theatrical print", while yet another cautiously wrote that his Hamlet was "on the level" with the Hamlets of Charles Kean, Samuel Phelps, Charles Albert Fechter, and Henry Irving (Watermeier 1971, 169). It was not the kind of critical reception that Booth had hoped for, but in the long run he "worked his way out of the critical box" and his Richelieu and Lear were warmly praised and his clarity of speech was appreciated by Londoners.

In the fall of 1883, he returned to the American stage, though physically exhausted by the last year abroad and much worried about the costs of his last tour. He continued to travel from city to city for the next three years, until in 1886 he agreed to be managed by Lawrence Barnett, who organized his last three transcontinental tours, which brought his career to a close. One member of his later touring companies was Katherine Goodale, then known as Kitty Molony, a young actress who kept a diary of the season and long afterwards wrote a book about it. The spirit of her reporting is faithful to the event. Here is the account of one March night in 1887 in San Francisco, when he opened *Hamlet* there:

The audience must have been expecting the Star to walk on, for the curtain went up without a sound from the front. The King began his speech. Then the inky-cloaked figure was recognized, and they broke loose. I was in the first entrance, prompt side – where the clock was. I timed that San Francisco reception. It lasted more than five minutes ... Mr. Booth held his sombre mood and posture as long as he could, then bowed gravely – not a trace of a smile upon his face. But they – out there – kept it up, until he was forced to step out of character and wanly smile upon them ... The night threatened to become a demonstration to Edwin Booth, with *Hamlet* left out. The actor compelled quiet by slipping into character, but a *Hamlet* that made one feel as if Jove's lightning bolts had been turned loose and were striking all about one. (Shattuck 1967, 21)

From 1887 to 1889 Barrett accompanied Booth on national tours and occasionally they still performed *Hamlet*. The great actor lacked the old-time

identification with the part and there was nothing remarkable in it, his voice growing faint and his performance inadequate. On April 4, 1891, he would play his last Hamlet at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where three thousand people crowded the auditorium to see his final appearance on any stage and hear him softly murmuring his farewell speech.

His last great enterprise was to create a club devoted to actors, following the inspiration of the Garrick Club in London. When he founded the Players Club, he stipulated that in it men of the theater should associate with men of letters and with artists, painters, sculptors, and architects, because he believed that it was not good for the members of any one profession to socialize exclusively with one another. From the beginning of his project, in the summer of 1887, he started to meet actors, managers, and artists in order to show them his plans. He would give the Club everything he owned pertaining to theatrical production and more than a thousand books, paving the way for the creation of the first American library for theatre studies. The club, which would be called "The Players", was inaugurated on January 1, 1888. Edwin Booth, as its president, would give the first speech recalling that a little more than sixty years earlier his father had crossed the ocean to try to make his name in America, while it had taken the same sixty years for his son to gain the approval of that land which his father in a certain sense had disowned, bringing from the Old to the New World the roots of its theatrical tradition: Shakespeare.¹⁴

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¹⁴ On November 13, 1913, in Gramercy Park, in New York City, the statue of Booth by Edmond T. Quinn was unveiled. The statue stands in full view of the home in which the actor died. New York had not until then possessed any sculptured memorial to the greatest of American actors or to the Bard, with the one exception of Ward's statue of Shakespeare in Central Park.

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