

# LINCOLN LORE

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## BOOTH'S APPEARANCE IN WASHINGTON, NOVEMBER 1863

Adverse comments in the press about the ability of John Wilkes Booth as an actor during his appearance in Washington in November 1863 may have influenced his mental attitude which finally drove him to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. On Monday night, November 2nd he began a two weeks engagement at Ford's Theatre and his last appearance was on Saturday night the nineteenth. The President and his wife with four guests, two of them his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, were present on the evening of November 9th. They saw Booth play the part of Raphael in "The Marble Heart."

Booth's first appearance was in "Richard the Third" which presumably allowed him to play in his favorite role for which he had received his greatest acclaim. The *Washington Daily Chronicle* gave a full column review of the play on the editorial page of its morning edition for November 3rd. The dramatic critic who wrote the review dealt harshly with Booth and almost read him out of the fraternity of actors. The caption of the review was entitled "Mr. J. Wilkes Booth as Richard III." The critic's introductory sentences briefly set forth Shakespeare's political prejudices which prompted the creation of such an unlovely character as Richard III and reveals that the reviewer was something of a student of the English playwright. The historical synopsis concludes with the statement that "From the day of Garrick to this present time Richard III has been the most improbably monster upon the stage."

Focusing his attention on Booth the critic observes that most tragedians are convinced that "Richard the brute is more popular in the galleries than Richard the genial and courtly Prince," and Booth is singled out as a good example of this class of actors. The reviewer continues with these deductions respecting Booth's interpretations: "He certainly deserves the merit of giving us the very worst Richard now upon the stage. In plainer words his Richard is as bad as it is possible for an actor to make him. It is possible that there might have been such a Richard as Shakespeare drew . . . but such a creation as that of Mr. Booth never existed. He does not seem to be satisfied with the text before him. That is bad enough. . . . He evidently thinks that his audiences desire gross food." Possibly Booth may not have been greatly disturbed at reading the criticism thus far, in fact it may have appealed to his vanity. The reviewer, however, continues in a still more critical vein in these words:

"When Mr. Booth comes upon the stage, he looks like a rascal. . . . He is satisfied to adopt all the green-room customs—to scowl in certain parts, because his father scowled—to rub his hands in a coarse, fiendish manner, as though there was as much brutality in his nature as in one of his own murderers." These comments about his mimicry may not have been so easily dismissed by Booth as the preliminary remarks may have been. The reviewer several months later, when Lincoln was assassinated, may have recalled these very lines as a sort of an unheralded prophecy.

But the critic has more to say about the professional attitude of Booth compared with other tragedians. He continues: "He (Booth) must be a tragedian, an inheritor of his father's genius. He insists upon being mentioned in the same sentence as Forrest, Macrady,

Davenport, Wallack and Edwin Booth. This is an attempt to obtain fame under false pretenses." The critic, however, does have these few complimentary words for him: "We do not express it in any spirit of unkindness to this young man. He has many natural gifts—a fine figure, expressive face, and a rich full eye that seems capable of intense expression. His voice is very much like that of his brother Edwin, without, perhaps, its sweetness or melody."

The final comments of the critic must have left Booth in a mental state from which he did not soon recover as he is cited as "a representative of a vicious and depraved school of tragedy . . . who make it their business to gain applause and notoriety by departing as far as possible from the duty that lies before them. Richard III as Shakespeare wrote it was unjust in a political sense but still it was a tragedy. . . . Richard III however, as Mr. Booth plays it is neither tragedy nor a drama, but something noisy, unpleasant, and improbable, which should not again be played before an audience of judgment and taste."

Mr. Booth did not heed the critic's advice, and after appearing in successive nights in "The Robbers," "The Lady of Lyons," and "The Merchant of Venice," Saturday's paper in a display ad states:

"Sixth appearance of J. Wilkes Booth, assisted and supported by the strongest dramatic combination ever in Washington, Saturday Evening, Nov. 3, 1863, Shakespeare's sublime tragedy in five acts, Richard III." The theater's news story probably prepared by Mr. Ford gives a genealogical review of the famous members of the Booth family who have been noted tragedians, but did not comment on Booth's ability as an interpreter of "Richard III."

The following week Booth appeared each evening in the following respective plays; *The Marble Heart*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Money*, and on Friday, November 13 the theater announcement stated: "On this occasion *Richard III* will be presented for the last time." The series of plays closed Saturday night with a repetition of *The Robbers*.

Booth's first appearance in Washington was a week's engagement in the previous April at Glover's Theatre. Here he also appeared in *Richard III* and it is reported that the President with Governor Morton of Indiana viewed this performance. The *Intelligencer* reported: "The effect produced upon the audience was absolutely startling and bordered nearly upon the terrible." Yet the same paper continued that Booth, played, "not from stage rule, but from his soul, and his soul is inspired with genius." Possibly the severe adverse criticism in the *Chronicle* six months later was partly due to the favorable comments in the *Intelligencer*.

The *Chronicle* in which the criticism of John Wilkes Booth appeared was sometimes called Lincoln's paper as it strongly supported the administration. The appearance of Mr. Lincoln and his party in the box on the night of November 9 must have been observed by Booth and possibly at this time he first conceived the idea of eventually abducting Lincoln from the theatre box which is said to have been one of his earliest steps in the final conspiracy.