Theater of War: Booth and Beyond

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Abstract
Lastly, we come upon perhaps the best known actor of the Civil War era, John Wilkes Booth. Of course, the reason memory allows us to recall the name is not because of the merits achieved through his profession, but rather because he murdered the elected executive official – United States President Abraham Lincoln. Booth, a product of a theater family, was a dramatic, eccentric, and impatient being. He wanted the leading roles, did not want to prepare the role, but to simply play the role. His brother, Edwin Booth, a talented poetical performer, one might deduce, did prepare for his roles, as he performed the role of Hamlet for one-hundred shows straight in New York City during his career. [excerpt]

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Lastly, we come upon perhaps the best known actor of the Civil War era, John Wilkes Booth. Of course, the reason memory allows us to recall the name is not because of the merits achieved through his profession, but rather because he murdered the elected executive official – United States President Abraham Lincoln. Booth, a product of a theater family, was a dramatic, eccentric, and impatient being. He wanted the leading roles, did not want to prepare the role, but to simply play the role. His brother, Edwin Booth, a talented poetical performer, one might deduce, did prepare for his roles, as he performed the role of Hamlet for one-hundred shows straight in New York City during his career.

Without doubt, the evening of April 29, 1865, will live and vividly remain in the minds and imaginations of students of the Civil War. However, Sautter’s lecture was not a mere outlet from which another retelling of that fateful Good Friday was to be preached. Instead, the lecture transcended the preconceived notions of theater in the mid-nineteenth century, and specifically the Civil War years, by exploring not only the role of the theater during the war, but the social context in which the entire framework of theater culture attempted to fit. Gender, progress, patriotism, and parody were all encouraged through means of theater to express the hopes, fears, intrigue, and shock of American audiences during the American Civil War era.

Professor Sautter stated that his interest in the subject of Civil War era theater comes from the idea of discovery: the “joy with research was in the unexpected finds.” For him, finding the publication of parody “playbills” mocking the upper reaches of Lincoln and his Republican party was rewarding. These “playbills” were a written form of political cartoon, and was one of the happy accidents he came upon while researching the topic.
Sautter finds the subject matter relevant to the twenty-first century because, as his life is defined through theater instruction and performance, he attempted to understand the Civil War era through a field recognizable to his own. Just as “warfare seems to be winding down [for our society today], many men and women are still in uniform and are still in danger.” He stated that it is “always interesting to see how different eras deal with similar issues, and how they tried to carry on everyday lives even though they lived in epic changing times.”

DID YOU KNOW?

• President Abraham Lincoln himself was fond of theater, and was known to have committed large passages of Shakespeare to memory. Not only this, but he invited and received actors into the White House during the war, despite the opinions held by high-class society and the clergy about theater performers.
• It was commonly accepted for actors to forget lines because of learning and playing multiple roles in a short time. They would call offstage for the line.
• The leading theater cities during the Civil War were Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City.
• The theater world was in enough “trouble” with the clergy. They kept the Sabbath, and no plays were performed on Sundays.
• The Civil War era was the age of melodrama (literally, a “play with music” where action was driven by emotional extremes.
• Nineteenth century theater was the epitome of narrative, followed a script, and typically was not what would be considered today as musical theater. Though many performances had orchestras, “ditties” were performed throughout the performances, and mood music underscored the action on stage, musical theater as current audiences know it was a long way away.

Sources:
* All information quoted within was from “The American Theater During the Civil War,” a lecture by Richard Sautter, Adjunct Instructor of Theatre Arts at Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

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