

John Wilkes Booth in Buffalo

July 1863

In July of 1863, J. Wilkes Booth, famous actor and soon-to-be infamous assassin, performed in Buffalo. His father, Junius Brutus, was a well-known Shakespearean star of the stage. His two older brothers were also very successful in the theatre, Edwin as an actor, and Junius Brutus, Jr. as a stage manager. According to the historian Lloyd Lewis, Booth, named after the English agitator John Wilkes, “stressed the ‘Wilkes’ in his name ... and having his friends call him ‘Wilkes’ more often than ‘John’”.



During the late spring and summer of 1863, Booth stormed the northern cities with several theatrical engagements. During the week of July 6, 1863, Booth performed at the Metropolitan Theatre in Buffalo, taking on different roles each evening. The Metropolitan Theatre opened in 1852 at Main and Seneca Streets. The name changed to the Academy of Music in 1868.



The Buffalo newspapers gushed over Booth's appearances and performances.

Buffalo Daily Republic, July 6, 1863:

J. Wilkes Booth. The distinguished young actor, J. Wilkes Booth plays Richard III at the Metropolitan tonight. In this character he is probably without a rival on the American stage.

Buffalo Courier & Republic, July 7, 1863

...a full house welcomed the distinguished actor, and that his treatment of the character (Richard III) was really superb. His splendid *personnel* and voice, added to the histrionic genius which belongs to him as a Booth, make him really one of the finest tragedians on the American stage. Tonight he appears as Claude Melnotte in the Lady of Lyons. Do not fail to see him.

The Evening Post and the Buffalo Courier gave Booth quite an extensive review for his role as Claude Melnotte.

Buffalo Evening Post, July 8, 1863

Such artists as Mr. Booth improve the taste, refine the mind, please the intellect, and elevate the dramatic profession. All these advantages were evidently realized in his very beautiful and effective impersonation, last evening, of Claude Melnotte, in Bulwer's splendid drama, "The Lady of Lyons." Every emotion was depicted, every passage rendered in strict accordance with the classic author's text and conception, realizing Shakespeare's great dramatic precept of 'holding the mirror up to nature.' The effect upon the audience was what might have been expected—thorough appreciation and hearty applause. The other principal characters were ably sustained.

This evening the character of Pescara in the play of the "Apostate, or the Horrors of the Inquisition," will assuredly further test and fully confirm our opinion of Mr. Booth's rare tragic powers.

Buffalo Courier, July 8, 1863

J. Wilkes Booth. — The "Lady of Lyons" was produced at the Metropolitan last evening. Mr. J. Wilkes Booth taking the part of Claude Melnotte, and Miss Annie Waite appearing as Pauline...

Of Mr. Booth, who is the star regnant at the Metropolitan, we acknowledge our inability to speak as we would like to this morning. He is young, vigorous, and seems to be in the full possession of the enjoyment of all the power inherited from his father. Although his acting lacks *tone*, we are impressed with the immense original power lying back of all he attempts. Wilkes Booth is just the man for our citizens to admire, and we shall look to our dramatic people, for a recognition of his claims.

The Courier and the Commercial Advertiser (see below) offered at least some criticism of Booth's acting style --"his acting lacks *tone*" -- but in the end the *Courier* incredibly suggested that "**Wilkes Booth is just the man for our citizens to admire**".

Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, July 8, 1863

Theatre. – Another fine audience was in attendance at the Metropolitan last evening, to witness Mr. Booth's rendition of Claude Melnotte... We believe Mr. Booth is destined to occupy a rank in his profession second to none in the country. He is young, and whatever imperfections may be observable in his style, will be remedied by experience... Tonight Mr. Booth appears in his great part of Pescara, in the popular play of "The Apostate."

Buffalo Evening Post, July 9, 1863

Metropolitan Theatre. – The crowded state of the theatre last evening, showed clearly that the more Mr. J. Wilkes Booth is seen, the more is he appreciated by the intellectual audiences that, since his first appearance, last Monday, graced the Metropolitan with their presence. The role of Pescara, in the "Apostate", was most impressively sustained by Mr. Booth, and developed new and striking features of his dramatic ability...

Tonight, Mr. Booth will portray that most interesting and finest drawn character of Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

Booth finished his week in Buffalo playing the role of Macbeth.



Buffalo Evening Post, July 11, 1863

We regret to announce the last night of Mr. J. Wilkes Booth, the young tragedian, who will appear this evening in his great character of Macbeth.... Mr. Booth, in the week just concluded, has given our citizens a rare feast of the "legitimate", including his famous personation of Richard III. The crook-backed tyrant, in his hands, walks the stage a cool, insinuating animation of duplicity and craft, whose murderous designs are gilded by consummate address and rare powers of persuasion. He invests it with new interest, and the audience, in witnessing it, feel that an artist is before them. We hope to see him on our boards again at no distant day.

It was quite a feat for the actors of the day to play so many different roles in so short a time while winning the approval of the audience. During his week in Buffalo, Booth played the role of Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard III, Pescara and Claude Melnotte among others.

So how talented of an actor was J. Wilkes Booth considered to be? By his contemporaries, he was considered to be an inferior actor to his famous father, Junius Brutus, and his older brother, Edwin. Or maybe it is safer to say that he had much potential that had yet to be reached. The historian Lloyd Lewis described Booth as one who “could never bring himself to learn the secret of good acting. His hatred of reading extended to prompt books, and he was notorious for forgetting his lines. When these lapses came, he imagined that he could cover them up with violent bellows and sword-wavings. In such moments he would prance and jump about the stage in picturesque displays. When dramatics failed, he would fall back on athletics. Pathetically believing that it was more wonderful to stun audiences with a brilliant personality than to capture them with art, he was forever rearranging Shakespeare and Schiller so that his entrances might be made in staggering leaps off precipices and battlements.” This sounds very much as Lincoln’s assassin when he jumped from the balcony onto the stage to obtain dramatic effect.

Despite his arrogant displays, Booth was popular among most actors of his time. He was considered good hearted and was never taken seriously for his talk of violence. “None of his friends took seriously his claims to a reckless love of the South.” If so serious, they asked, why was he not in the military fighting for his rights?

John Wilkes Booth time in Buffalo came one week after the three-day battle of Gettysburg. While soldiers were dying for the cause they believed in, J. Wilkes Booth was on a tour up North earning money and fame.

SOURCES

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