

"Life and Art of Edwin Booth"

By William Winter. Macmillan & Co.

It is NOT LIKELY that anybody will dispute the preëminent right of William Winter to be the biographer of Edwin Booth; for no man living had a longer or closer intimacy with the great actor than he, or is better qualified by theatrical experience or literary skill to do justice to the subject. His book is a striking tribute of friendship and admiration to the dead player, as well as a standard work of reference for all future students of the history of the American stage.

Concerning the actual events in Booth's life, Mr. Winter has little new to tell; for the actor lived, during the whole of his professional career, in the blaze of a light stronger even than that which beats about a throne, and every procurable detail, concerning himself and every member of his family, was published over and over again in the newspapers of the land. But Mr. Winter was behind the scenes as well as in front of them, and if he has no new facts to relate, he is able to present some of those that are old in a new and interesting light. With regard to Booth's wonderful success at the Winter Garden Theatre, for instance, he demolishes completely the common delusion that it was owing in some way to the literary and managerial work of the late William Stuart. As a matter of fact, Booth's reputation had been established long before that engagement began, and the real cleverness of Stuart was exhibited in his contriving to share in his associate's prosperity, and the plausibility and assurance with which he claimed the whole credit for it. Mr. Winter makes it perfectly clear that Booth was the benefactor, not Stuart. Equally short work is made of the pretensions of Benjamin Baker, William Wheatleigh and others, who imagined themselves the authors of Booth's renown. Mr. Winter also puts a new aspect upon the failure of Booth's Theatre. This was not a failure at all in the ordinary meaning of the word, but the logical and inevitable result of misplaced confidence and an almost childlike ignorance of business affairs. The theatre itself, when once opened, was prosperous enough. The net profits of the house during the first year were \$102,000, during the second year \$85,000 and during the third \$70,000. A mortgage of \$100,000 was lifted and the floating debt was reduced by more than \$40,000. At the time when Booth retired from the management, because his health could endure the strain no longer, the total debt was only \$350,000 (secured by mortgage), and this had nothing directly to do with his bankruptcy, which occurred a year later. There seems to be no reasonable doubt that he could have saved the property and paid for it in a very few years, if he had not listened to foolish and interested counsel. It is melancholy to think of golden opportunities thus unfortunately lost. His fame could scarcely have been much brighter than it is, but his life-work would have been much more fruitful in results, if he could have had a permanent artistic home in the metropolis.

Without going too much into details respecting dates and places, Mr. Winter gives all the salient facts of Booth's romantic and checkered career, and draws a delightful picture of his personal character, of his high-minded and affectionate nature, his staunch friendship, his modesty, his courage in affliction, his generosity, his genial humor and his freedom from professional jealousy. It is pleasant to read his hearty appreciation of Henry Irving, and of the courtesy which he received at his hands; and to see, by his own private letters how completely free he was from the petty vanities which make second and third rate actors so intolerable. Certainly, no man was ever less spoiled by triumphs or soured by

misfortunes; and it may be added that no actor ever enjoyed in a more marked degree the affection and esteem of his fellows. To attribute to his influence, as Mr. Winter does by implication, the improvement that has taken place in stage representations during the last thirty or forty years, is going a little too far. Beyond doubt, his personal aspirations were high, and his genius, taste and early training inclined him towards those masterpieces of the drama of which he became so brilliant an exponent; but it would be difficult to explain in what way his work contributed to the permanent elevation of the theatre. On the contrary, the most obvious comment upon it is that it was comparatively barren of results, because—at least during the later and most influential part of his career—he relied for success almost entirely upon his individual efforts. It is true that, in the early Winter Garden days, and in the opening seasons of his Twenty-Third Street Theatre, he was supported by competent companies and provided spectacular scenery; but these were spasmodic efforts, and it can scarcely be pretended that, during the past twenty years or so, his scenery or his support was conducive to the elevation of the stage. This indifference to the quality of his surroundings was the one great blot upon his artistic reputation.

In writing of Booth as an actor, Mr. Winter's personal friendship for the man sometimes gets the better of his judgment. Few theatre-goers will be able to accept his estimate of the actor's performance of such parts as Romeo, Claude Melnotte, Petruchio, Ruy Blas and Don César de Bazan, which were not suited either to his style or temperament. The fact is that Booth's great and deserved fame is founded upon his masterly interpretation of six or eight characters—Hamlet, Richelieu, Iago, Bertuccio, Shylock, Lear, Sir Giles and Pescara. In half a dozen other parts he was admirable but not superlative. In Mr. Winter's eyes all these and as many more were masterpieces, and his description of them is scarcely eloquent or interesting. The true value of the book consists in the revelation of the man himself—his high-mindedness, his steadfastness in affliction, his devotion to his friends and his gradual artistic development. As mere record it is eminently satisfactory, and the separation of the biographical from the critical parts is extremely convenient and judicious. The different portraits of the actor at various periods of life, in costume and in every-day dress, lend especial attractiveness to a volume which is everything that can be desired in the way of type, paper and binding. No theatrical library will be complete without it.