Portrait of J. Wilkes Booth.: PAINTED IN DETROIT AND STILL HERE---INDIVIDUAL REM
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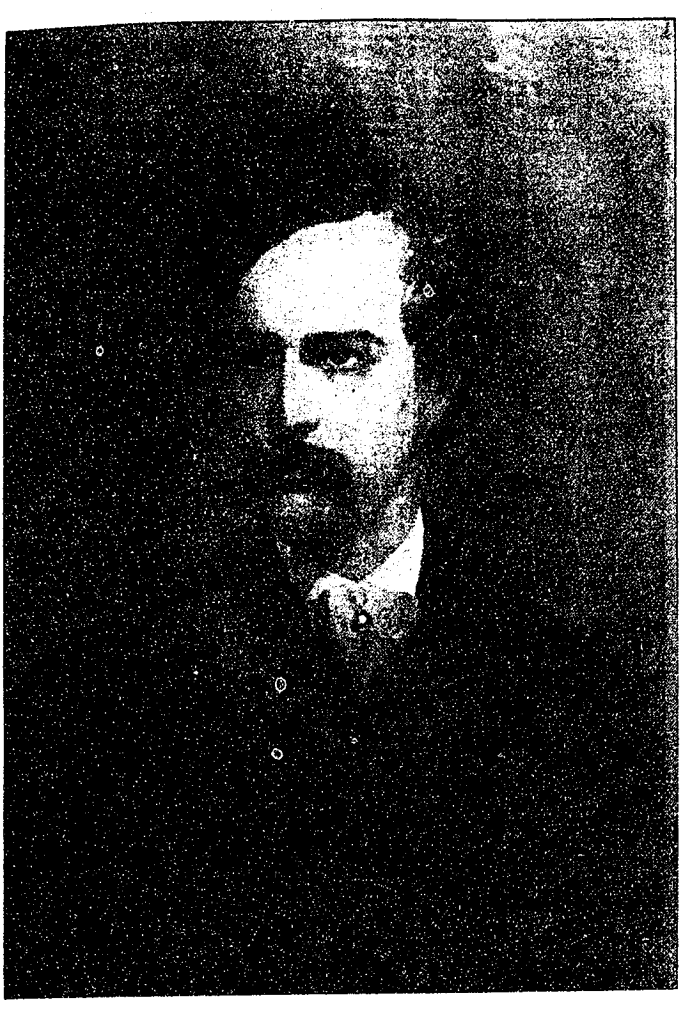

J. WILKES BOOTH.

From Portrait Painted When He Was Acting in Detroit.

Portrait of J. Wilkes Booth.

PAINTED IN DETROIT AND STILL HERE---INDIVIDUAL REMINISCENCES OF THE ACTOR.

RECENTLY a representative of The Free Press discovered a portrait of John Wilkes Booth which was painted in this city in 1864, a half-tone reproduction of which is published herewith. Upon the back of the portrait, which is life-size, is written the following inscription: "John Wilkes Booth, painted by C. S. Wiseman, of the Athenaeum Stock Co., corner of Randolph and Congress streets."

Inquiry among various of the residents of the city revealed several gentlemen who remembered distinctly that Wilkes Booth played an engagement of two weeks at the Athenaeum about that time, but no one could be found who had any distinct recollection of Wiseman, except our own famous artist, Robert Hopkin. "I remember Wiseman better as a painter," said Mr. Hopkin, "than as an actor. I know that he usually played old men, but as I now recall him he was indifferent as an actor. He left Detroit, and I heard of him later at Philadelphia as a professional portrait painter of some repute."

Immediately following his engagement at the Athenaeum, Wilkes Booth was taken ill with what proved to be typhoid fever. For nearly three months he was confined to his bed, at a residence still standing on Jefferson avenue, and an old lady still living in the city, who had occasion to see him a number of times during that illness, said: "Mr. Booth was a very sick man and a very polite, considerate patient, except, as was two or three times the case, when his mind wandered. Then he was violently impetuous in action and thrillingly impressive in speech, not always choosing the most proper language. I recollect one time that my husband was trying, by the doctor's advice, to find some dainty bit of food that might tempt the sick man's taste. He brought in a few oranges and a pineapple and laying them in sight on a table in the room, he said: 'There, John, the doctor says you must eat every bit of these.' Booth raised himself on the bed and asked that the fruit be handed to him. Then, as the tray containing it was laid upon his bed, he cried out in the wildest kind of a way: 'Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it!' and out of the window went tray, oranges and all. That was the beginning of a relapse which for two or three days we thought would end fatally. It wasn't long after that that we were wishing our fears had been realized."

Ex-Mayor John Patton has a clear recollection of Wilkes Booth as an actor, and says that he was an extremely handsome young fellow, very graceful in his manner and having an exceptionally agreeable voice, even when tested to its utmost lim it. "As I remember him he was extremely good as 'Hamlet' and 'Richard III.,' but his 'Macbeth' did not impress me. However, he was a very versatile actor and much more than acceptable in whatever I saw him play."

"Do I remember Wilkes Booth in Detroit?" said a retired newspaper editor. "I do, and for a good professional reason. In those days I used to look after the theaters. One evening the advertised programme was 'The Romance of a Poor Young Man,' with Booth in the leading character. On that particular evening I desired to make a call, and having seen Booth in the part I did not go near the theater but wrote a very elaborate and favorable notice of the performance. The next morning I learned that the bill had been changed, and I also learned that a newspaper writer cannot afford to take any risks."

A gentleman long since retired from business as theatrical manager who is at present residing in Detroit, said: "Yes, sir, I knew Booth quite well, and was in Detroit when he played a star engagement here. Strange to say I never saw him in any part but that of Raphael in 'The Marble Heart,' but I want to say that I never saw a man who looked the part and acted it as that boy did. He wasn't anything but a boy. I met him in Baltimore, he was born there, you know, and my acquaintance with him was through various meetings we had together in an effort to bring about an engagement for Pittsburg, Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Detroit and Chicago. And say, what do you suppose were the terms he offered which I declined?—of course he was to play with the stock companies in the cities named, my position being purely speculative as the agent who could get for him the desired openings. I could have placed him for three months, and I am certain I would have made money, if I had agreed to pay him $100 a week with a half clear benefit in each city at the close of the respective engagements. He was a genteel young chap, but moody. For instance, one morning we met at Earle's hotel in Philadelphia, and by his first greeting I thought he was in the best of spirits. We sat laughing and chatting about actors and actresses for fully an hour, when suddenly he arose from his chair and without a word started for the door. 'Where are you going, John?' I asked, very much surprised. Turning squarely so that he faced me and in a dazed way, he said: 'It doesn't matter. I'm going, that's all.' The evening of the same day he met me with the utmost cordiality and freedom, and apparently had forgotten all about the morning incident."

Among the members of the company at the Detroit Opera House last week in support of Walker Whiteside, was J. L. Saphore, who began his career as an actor forty-five years ago, and is a graduate of those standard universities of the drama, the Chestnut Street theater and the Arch Street theater in Philadelphia.

"Did I know John Booth?" he exclaimed fervently in answer to the inquiry from The Free Press representative, "I should think I did. We were boys together on the stage in the days when the stage was sacred to the members of the profession, when acting was a profession and not, as it is to-day, an avocation. When every theater had its green room and when we boys—I was a 'utility man'—could enter the green room, seek our corner and stay there quietly, listening to the great ones talk—learning our business. Yes, sir, I knew John Booth when he was a member of our company at the Arch Street Theater, I bade him good-bye when he left us to go to the stock company at Richmond, where Harry Langdon—you know Harry Langdon, who is still on the stage—taught him the sword combat in Richard III., and the next time I saw him, a couple of years later, he was the star at the Boston Museum. It was there that his brother Edwin first saw him in the part of Pescara in 'The Apostate,' and after the performance Ned sent John a note saying: 'Dear John—Go up to the house and get my Pescara clothes. I shall never again attempt to play the part,' and he kept his word.

"What did I think of J. Wilkes Booth as an actor? I think he was the greatest of them all, because he could play anything well. His best part was, in my opinion, Pescara. In that he was simply incomparable. His Raphael in 'The Marble Heart' was the best, by far, that I ever saw, and I have seen all the great ones. I think his Hamlet was perhaps the weakest part in his repertoire, but his Richard III., Macbeth, Othello, Iago, Shylock—and mind you, he was only a boy—were distinct masterpieces. Of course comparisons are odious, but with the utmost respect for Edwin Booth's remarkable abilities as an actor, I do not believe he was the equal of his brother. Socially John was, ordinarily, a mild-mannered man of habits as proper as those of the average man. He was not a drunkard or even a hard drinker, but he was not a hypocrite. He was thoroughly sincere in his work as an actor and a man of much more than ordinary intelligence. At times he was peculiar in that he desired to be absolutely alone, didn't care to speak to anyone or have anyone speak to him. Seemed simply to desire a solitary stroll with his own thoughts.

"Ah! I expected that question. Well, it is my firm conviction that every man or woman who ever had anything bordering upon a friendly acquaintance with John Wilkes Booth is firm in the conviction that our nation's president died at the hands of a pitiable, unfortunate, raving maniac."

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