

## Shakespeare and Edwin Booth

During the City's first theatrical "golden era," the most popular playwright on the San Francisco stage was William Shakespeare. In the decade immediately following the discovery of gold, from 1850 until 1860, 22 of the Bard's 38 plays were performed, and several were given repeatedly. The most popular actors in town were those who could make audiences weep for Romeo and Juliet, laugh at Bottom, gasp over Desdemona's fate, and suffer anew with Hamlet.

During this period, San Francisco was a magnet for young players. Far from the glaring pressures of New York, in a remarkably accessible community that had few actors, a gifted novice could find work, perform major roles, and launch a career. San Francisco nurtured and encouraged many an actor, several of whom went on to become national celebrities and artists of lasting influence. One of them, Edwin Booth, is still known today.

Edwin Booth came to San Francisco as a teenager with his actor-father Junius Brutus Booth, in 1852. The elder Booth's once magnificent acting career was on the downswing, mainly the result of excessive drinking. He soon returned to the east coast, the scene of his former glory. Edwin Booth stayed here, gaining valuable experience as an actor in the mining camps and in the theaters of San Francisco, performing everything from Shakespeare to vaudeville and putting on blackface for minstrel shows. He presented a new style of acting, one more "normal" as compared to the declaiming and stage thumping in British accents that his colleagues continued to favor. His straightforward and gripping presentation soon made Booth a popular favorite as he blossomed into a skilled and versatile actor.

Four years later, Booth left to test his talents in the theatrical centers of the east. He became enormously successful and, by his early thirties, was hailed as the country's finest interpreter of Shakespeare. His portrayal of Hamlet ran on Broadway for an unprecedented 100 performances. Dubbed the "Prince of Players" by the press, Booth brought great dignity as well as genius to the profession that many still considered morally dubious.

Booth often returned to San Francisco, including a tour in 1876 when he had reached the peak of his career and was welcomed back enthusiastically by the city that had first recognized his talents.

Edwin's brother John Wilkes Booth carved his own infamous place in history as the man who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln.