

# Edwin Booth's



Founded as a members' club for his peers by nineteenth-century America's greatest actor, The Players has won a reputation for its historical stewardship—and irrepressible bonhomie

**B**y 1888 the actor Edwin Booth had been through life's wringer, and then some. In 1863 his wife, Mary Devlin, the great love of his life, died suddenly of pneumonia. Two years later, his fanatical brother John's assassination of Abraham Lincoln brought down disgrace and vili-

fication on the family and prompted Booth to retire from public life for a year. Then, in 1874, he lost his pride and joy—his own five-year-old, state-of-the-art theater at Twenty-third Street and Sixth Avenue in New York City—when bankruptcy forced him to close the business.

# Curtain Call

By Lansing  
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But now, fourteen years later, Booth had restored his fortune, his family honor, and his reputation as America's greatest Shakespearean actor by dint of long, hard work and exemplary living. Booth had been performing onstage since at least age sixteen, and at fifty-six he looked forward to settling down a

Fig. 1. Known as the Great Hall at The Players on Gramercy Park South, New York, this room off the foyer greets all visitors to the clubhouse. The large marble mantelpiece was sourced by Stanford White (1853–1906) for this room, and the walls are hung with theatrical portraits of past club members. *Photograph by Michael Finkelstein, courtesy of The Players, New York.*

Fig. 2. The terrace overlooking Gramercy Park was added by White in 1888. He removed the original brownstone stoop, added a two-story colonnade, and altered the windows to create the “loggia” as he called it. He also added the two projecting Gothic-style iron gas lanterns that flank the front entrance. *Finkelstein photograph, courtesy of The Players.*

Fig. 3. Edwin Booth (1833–1893) as Hamlet by Edmond Thomas Quinn (1868–1929), 1917, installed in Gramercy Park, New York, 1918. *Photograph by Sean Brady, courtesy of the Gramercy Park Block Association.*



Fig. 4. The Kinstler Room on the first floor of The Players. The portrait over the fireplace is a reproduction of a full-length portrait of Edwin Booth by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), 1890, now in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. To the right of the fireplace is one of a pair of chairs decorated, respectively, with the masks of tragedy and comedy. *Finkelstein photograph, courtesy of The Players.*

Fig. 5. Fireplace in the upstairs Card Room, which was formerly used as a private dining space. *Photograph by Trish Proto/Untapped New York.*



bit. One of the elements of a comfortable middle age that Booth had long contemplated was the founding of a social club for actors, one modeled on the Garrick Club in London, which had been established as a place “actors and men of refinement could meet on equal terms.”<sup>1</sup> Booth pictured his club as a place where he could live himself and keep his library and vast collection of theatrical artifacts. Above all, though, it would be a refuge for gentlemanly conviviality. “I want real men who will be able to realize what real men actors are,” as Booth described prospective members to actress Kitty Goodale while they crossed the Rockies in his private railroad car in 1887. “I want my club to be a place where actors are away from the glamour of the theater.”<sup>2</sup>

That brawny vision became a reality on December 31, 1888, with the founding of *The Players*—a club name suggested by the “All the world’s a stage” speech from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. That evening, in a

staid ceremony, Booth signed over the deed of his recently purchased town house on Gramercy Park to the new organization—which the architect Stanford White was in the midst of remodeling, with a colonnaded two-story porch festooned with elaborate wrought-iron lanterns—together with his books, art, and theatrical memorabilia collections. The Deed of Gift, as the club’s founding document is known, outlines Booth’s vision for the use of 16 Gramercy Park South: as a social club where actors might convene with men of other professions; as a repository for his theatrical library and collection for posterity and scholarship; and, finally, as his own home, with a third-floor apartment set aside for his personal use. The diverse interests and achievements of the sixteen charter members of the club on hand for the ceremony reflect the mix of talents Booth envisioned coming together. The group included noted actors of the day such as Lawrence Barrett,

Fig. 6. The second-floor library features one of White’s signature rosette ceiling designs. The shelves house a collection of theatrical books and manuscripts, and above hang portraits of actors and actresses by John Neagle (1796–1865). The reading table to the right features a display of nineteenth-century cabinet cards of famous actresses. *Trish Proto/Untapped New York photograph.*



Fig. 7. Edwin Booth's bedroom, where he died on June 7, 1893. The brass frame canopy bed dates from around 1870 and features the original canopy top frame with velvet hangings and a monogrammed coverlet. The bedroom's original wallpaper design and textured ceiling have been reproduced by Evergreen Architectural Arts. In the corner is a large German sixteenth-century-style two-handed sword, one of several historic theater props that have been added to the room by members over the years. *Photograph by Raphael Senzamici, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

Fig. 8. The bedroom seen from the sitting room. This is the view Booth would have had from his easy chair near the window. A leaf-carved horseshoe-back chair is drawn up to the Louis XVI-style roll-top desk. The floor is covered by a red-field Kazhak carpet. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*



John Drew, and Joseph Jefferson, as well as Mark Twain and William Tecumseh Sherman.

Unlike almost all of New York's storied social clubs—among them the Century Association, the Grolier, and the Salmagundi—The Players still occupies its original location. The club has thrived in the 145 years since its founding; and if it took a glacially long time to include other than “real men” among its ranks—women were not admitted as members until 1989, with an inaugural class that included Helen Hayes and Toni Morrison—The Players has earned a reputation as the least-starchy of the city's great clubs, and the most hospitable and spirited.

Still, all is not witty banter and hijinks here. The club's non-profit adjunct, The Players Foundation for Theatre Education, is charged with maintaining the library and art collection and making them accessible to scholars and students. Built on the books and papers in Booth's original



Fig. 9. The sitting room features a twelve-light Victorian chandelier that has been partially converted from gas to electricity. On the nineteenth-century mahogany drop-leaf table are some of Booth's personal effects, including a cherrywood humidor, a framed wool cap that he wore to play Hamlet, a book of poems by the theater critic William Winter (1836–1917), and a bronze cast of Booth's own hand holding that of his daughter, Edwina (1861–1938). A portrait of Mary Devlin (1840–1863), Booth's first wife and Edwina's mother, hangs to the left of the window. The sitting room will be the focus of the next phase of the restoration. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

bequest and augmented over the years with the holdings of other actors, the library—housed in a charming second-floor space with nineteenth-century appointments—includes books and manuscript letters, theatrical artifacts, costumes, photographs, and ephemera as well as some fifty thousand playbills (Fig. 6). The foundation is engaged in ongoing restoration of the art collection, which was built on member gifts, commissions, and special acquisitions, and includes works by such artists as Thomas Gainsborough, John Singer Sargent, James Montgomery Flagg, and Norman Rockwell. The club once owned a full-length 1890 portrait of Booth by Sargent, but it was deaccessioned in 2002 and is now in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Texas (Fig. 4).

The foundation is also responsible for the care and preservation of perhaps the most fascinating space at The Players: the apartment where Booth lived until his death in 1893. For the last several years, the bedroom-and-parlor suite had been kept in darkness to prevent sunlight from damaging fabrics and artworks, but the rooms have now undergone the first phase of a sparkling restoration. With all things kept as they



Fig. 10. Above Booth's desk, portraits of friends surround a plaster bust of William Shakespeare; above that hangs a framed rubbing of the epigraph on Shakespeare's tomb: "GOOD FRENDE FOR IESVS SAKE FORBEARE, / TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOSED HEARE, / BLESTE BE YE MAN YT SPARES THES STONES, / AND CVRST BE HE YT MOVES MY BONES." *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*



Fig. 11. A Louis XVI-style bronze mantel clock by Sypher and Company of New York stands alongside an American brown-glaze pottery vase and a German enamel-decorated green glass stein in front of a three-panel Victorian gilded gesso mirror. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

Fig. 12. Funeral wreath and photograph of Booth that were displayed at his memorial service in 1893 at the Church of the Transfiguration on 29th Street, New York. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

were in Booth's lifetime, the apartment is a veritable time capsule preserving the accoutrements with which a Gilded Age man-about-town surrounded himself. Aside from tidy furnishings—a brass bed, inlaid mahogany dressing table, rolltop desk for business papers—the rooms contain a number of personal and professional artifacts, including a skull used in productions of *Hamlet*, a portrait of Mary Devlin, a bronze casting of Booth's daughter Edwina's hand in his, and a shrine to Shakespeare that features a bust of the bard and a rubbing of the inscription on his grave (Fig. 10). A tobacco fiend like most men of his time and station, Booth also left behind an assortment of cigarette and cigar cases, tobacco pouches, a humidor, and other smoking paraphernalia (Fig. 14). Until recently, it was said, the scent of tobacco still hung in the air of Booth's rooms.



Speaking of smoking, one of the longstanding traditions of The Players is its annual Pipe Night. Originally late-night gatherings at which members smoked long-stemmed churchwarden pipes and got up to who knows what mischief, the evenings evolved into testimonial dinners starting in 1936. John Gielgud was the first honoree, and over the decades such luminaries as Marlene Dietrich, Frank Sinatra, Lauren Bacall, and Morgan Freeman have been recognized. The latest honoree was Jane Curtin. Pipe smoking is no longer permitted on Pipe Night, of course—a fitting gesture for an institution with one foot in the past, and the other in the present. “I really believe that Edwin Booth and our founders would be delighted if they visited The Players today,” says film producer Townes Coates, current president of the club. “It’s true that our membership has grown in its richness and variety in ways they never imagined. But the commitment to build and protect our collections and preserve our clubhouse heritage makes it familiar across the generations. Plus, our greatest inheritance—the laughter and warmth and conviviality that always made this club unique—is something you find every time you walk in the door. It feels like home.”

<sup>1</sup> Amelia Gentleman, “Time, gentlemen: when will the last all-male clubs admit women,” *The Guardian*, published online April 30, 2015.



Fig. 13. An inlaid mahogany dressing table with hinged panels stands in front of a window overlooking the treetops of Gramercy Park. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

Fig. 14. A match case and cigar case from Booth’s extensive personal collection of tobacco paraphernalia displayed in a curio cabinet. *Senzamici photograph, courtesy of The Players Foundation for Theatre Education.*

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Katherine Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 256.

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