

Chicago, Ill.



SCENE IN FORD'S THEATER ON NIGHT LINCOLN WAS SHOT DESCRIBED BY MEMBER OF CAST

(The following article, written at the request of the Rev. P. J. Cormican, S. J., librarian of Georgetown University, for the archives of the university, will be read with particular interest at this time when America prepares to celebrate the one hundred and fifteenth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. The writer, Mrs. Struthers, was a member of the cast of "Our American Cousin," the play which was being presented at Ford's Theater in Washington on April 14, 1865, the night President Lincoln was shot. She now lives in retirement at Montclair, N. J. Her description of the events immediately preceding and following the shooting is particularly vivid.)

By JEANNIE GOURLAY STRUTHERS

I was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, and came to this country with my baby sister when I was only two years old. My father and uncle were actors in Scotland, and soon after reaching New York father became a member of the William Burton Theater in Chambers street, where I made my first appearance at the age of three. I joined the Marsh Juvenile Troups when I was very young, and I played all sorts of parts. I must say we young actors were a wonder in all that we did. We travelled several times over the United States, and much of our travelling was done in wagons or stage coaches. We went from California to Australia in a sailing vessel, and the voyage took sixty-eight days. We made several tours of Australia and New Zealand. After our last visit to the Antipodes, we returned to the United States during the war in 1863-4.

Five of our family were in the Ford Theater on that fateful night when Lincoln was shot. My father, my sister Maggie and I had parts in the play, and my two brothers, Thomas and Robert, were among the audience. Father was Sir Edward Trenchard, I was Mary Meredith, and Maggie was a maid. I appeared on the program as Mary Trenchard, but that was a mistake of the printer.

I have always thought that Booth selected my scene to shoot the President. I refer to the dairy scene, which was the most absorbing part of the play. Asa Trenchard was "Our American Cousin," who gave the play its name. The part was played that night by Harry Hawk. He and I appeared in the dairy scene. Asa Trenchard returns from the United States to inherit property that had been willed to him. In the dairy scene he holds in his hand a copy of the will, according to the terms of which Mary Meredith is to inherit the property if her American Cousin does not take steps to do so. In the dairy scene he learns for the first time that if he claims the property bequeathed to him, he will disinherit Mary. The audience is aware of the struggle going on within him, and consequently follows the development of the play with rapt attention. While conversing with Asa, I sat on a bench, and as I sat there I noticed Booth in the rear of the auditorium. I had not seen him for some days, and I thought from his appearance and his nervous manner that he had been sick. He was a genial man and was a frequent visitor at the green room of Ford's Theater, where he was well liked by the members of the company.

Booth's Opportunity

During the dairy scene the house was so quiet that one could actually have heard a pin drop. Asa Trenchard asks Mary if she objects to smoking. She replies that she does not, and pulling out a cigar, he lights it with the will which would have disinherited her. That would have been the time for Booth to carry out his diabolical scheme, and I believe that was the time he selected for the purpose, for during that scene he could make his way to the President's box without attracting attention.

As I sat on the bench, I watched Booth, who was pale and hatless, making his way to the stairs and then to the dress circle. My scene ended, however, before the fatal shot was fired. I walked up the stage and the scene closed in on me. Ned Spangler, one of the scene-shifters and formerly Booth's servant, came in from holding Booth's horse to assist in moving the scenes. The scene had just been changed when the shot was fired. I had walked around to the right-hand side of the stage near to exit to the street and was standing there talking to a gentleman named William Withers, when I heard the shot. At first I thought it was some "gag" introduced into the play, but presently there was a commotion on the stage and an uproar in the audience. I moved forward to see what happened, when suddenly Booth with a dagger in his hand rushed by me, cutting Mr. Withers' coat as he passed. Then I heard the cries: "The President has been shot!"

Harry Hawk was on the scene at the time, and, under the belief that some one was shooting at him, he ran off the stage. When I reached the front of the stage, I looked up toward the President's box and saw him lying in his chair. My father and I were regular members of the cast, and were well acquainted with the theater, but Laura Keene and John Eyott were strangers, unfamiliar with the place. My father took Laura Keene and showed her the way to the President's box. She rushed up and found some of the President's attendants stripping him of his clothing. She lovingly and reverently took his head in her lap, and as she did so, she observed that blood was flowing from a wound back of his right ear, and trickling over her dress. Her costume thereby became a priceless relic having been dyed with the life-blood of our greatest American.

Father Carried Lincoln From Theater

It was evident that Mr. Lincoln was fatally wounded and could not be moved to a hospital. So my father and some others carried him out of the theater to a house across the street, where he died next morning. His death was a national calamity, and he is still mourned where liberty is cherished. Even his enemies hastened to make reparation to his character and to extol his virtues. For instance, Tom Taylor, who had always ridiculed Lincoln for the amusement of his English readers, wrote a poem after the tragedy to atone for his ridicule and make amends for outraged decency; but unfortunately his reparation came too late.

After the first act my brother Robert and a Scotchman named Williamson, whose father was tutor to Tad Lincoln, had dropped into a saloon adjoining the theater, where they found Booth and Spangler drinking. Booth filled a tumbler with whiskey and drained it. I presume Spangler did the same. The third member of the party took nothing and needed nothing. He was the Evil Spirit who instigated Cain.

As Booth leaped from the President's box, his spur caught in the drapery, and he was thrown forward on the stage and broke his leg. However, I did not know that at the time, although he pushed me in rushing past me. He also slashed Mr. Withers' coat with his dagger and cut it through. Before quitting the stage he turned around to the audience and shouted: "Sic Semper Tyrannis!" But the martyred President was no tyrant. He was the most kind-hearted of men and the best friend of the South.

Ned Spangler was arrested for saying, "It served him right for coming to the theater on Good Friday." He was also charged with making a bolt which secured the door of Lincoln's box on the inside and which prevented entrance from the outside. He usually slept in the theater, but after the tragedy, when the soldiers took possession of the building, Spangler came to our house with a little dog in his arms. Father refused to admit him. Then he went to Johnny Evans, who sheltered him for the night, and who was afterwards arrested, but released later. Mr. Evans died that same year. His wife is still living in Chicago, and she and I exchange an occasional letter. There are two or three of the cast still alive. Miss Helen Trueman resides in Los Angeles, I write to her also. William J. Ferguson met with an accident lately in Los Angeles, and is now in a critical condition at his home in Brooklyn, N. Y.

Booth Played in "Apostate"

I remember perfectly well the last appearance of John Wilkes Booth on the stage—or rather the last but one. His last appearance was in real tragedy, when he threw the world into mourning. On March 18, 1865, he took the part of Pescara in "Apostate." The play was given for the benefit of John McCullough, who impersonated Hemeya. The "Apostate" was followed by "Jonathan Bradford," and I was Annie Bradford. W. J. Ferguson had parts in both plays.

Laura Keene was the chief attraction in "Our American Cousin," and played the role of Florence Trenchard. The entertainment was announced as a benefit to her, and it was to be her last appearance on the stage. She was in poor health at the time, and she died a few years afterwards. She was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Montclair, N. J., and her remains were afterwards translated to Greenwood cemetery in Brooklyn, N. Y. She had two daughters who were educated at the Visitation Convent in Georgetown, D. C.