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Book Review: Thomas A. Bogar. Backstage at the Lincoln Assassination: The Untold Story of the Actors and Stagehands at Ford's Theatre. Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2013.

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Book Review

Jennifer Thompson

Many authors have written books about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Thomas Bogar is the first author to discuss what happened to the forty-six actors, stagehands, doorkeepers, prompters, musicians, costumers, and callboys who were in Ford's Theatre that night. He uncovered what each person witnessed, Booth's connection with them, and why the police arrested and harassed some of them, even though they were innocent.

He explained how this event disrupted their lives and how they feared for their safety, especially if they had recently been seen with Booth. "Most of the forty-six were completely innocent – unsuspecting of any plot, regardless of whether it was the original plan to abduct the president or the final one to assassinate him – yet they were nevertheless caught up in a terrifying round of arrests, interrogations, and life-altering consequences" (p. xvii). This event became a permanent part of their lives. Some never spoke about the event and some told their story in interviews over a period of sixty years, but none of them left written accounts behind. Most of them probably destroyed any papers that could possibly link them to Booth, and many of them seemed to disappear from the public eye.

These actors and stagehands had been professionals, skilled craftsmen, shrewd businessmen, or were new to the stage. Many of their careers ended that night; some died soon after, and several faced being charged as co-conspirators. A few of them were able to lead successful lives after that night, but Booth haunted all of them for the rest of their lives.

John Wilkes Booth was a familiar face at Ford's Theatre. He was a good-looking actor, who loved to talk, and his personal magnetism drew others to him. Women idolized him; whether they were actresses, waitresses, or maids, all of them were eager to be near him or to serve him. Booth was unlike other actors because he treated the backstage crew as equals, and "Most of the stagehands, drawn into his orbit, would do anything he asked of them" (p. 73). Some of the

actors had even worked for him the two weeks in April 1863 when he managed the Washington Theatre.

Booth visited the theatre during the rehearsal earlier that day to pick up his mail and learned that Lincoln and Grant were expected to attend that night. One of the actors joined Booth for a quick drink at the Star Saloon. Later that afternoon, “Booth invited everyone to join him for a drink at the Star Saloon” (p. 92). The head property man and a callboy accepted his offer. One actor was a childhood friend of Booth’s, who refused to be part of his kidnapping plot. Booth gave him a sealed letter to deliver to the *National Intelligencer* publishers the next day. Several of the crew saw Booth demonstrating how quickly his horse could run. They brought and put a halter on the horse, but Booth told them not to remove the saddle. He treated them to a round of drinks at the Star Saloon. Later as the play was about to begin, one of the stagehands joined Booth for drinks at the saloon. During Act Two, Booth asked that stagehand to hold his horse near the stage door for the rest of the act, but he was needed to change scenes onstage. The stagehand ordered the errand boy to hold the horse instead. Several people saw Booth enter the lobby and slip into the theatre without a ticket. This was not unusual because “Booth was often seen around Ford’s” (p. 111).

Everyone’s lives were changed when Booth pulled the trigger. All of them feared for their lives as the mob outside threatened to burn down the theatre. Soldiers rushed in to confront the crowd. They sealed off the entrances to the theatre and ordered the cast and crew to remain inside while they cleared out the audience. They arrested those who attempted to run. “For the next few hours, the mob attacked anyone brought in, even witnesses to be questioned, and police had to protect them from being killed” (p. 119). They allowed the actors to leave early the next morning. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered that everything in the theatre be impounded, all incoming mail be forwarded and read by the War Department before being released, no one could leave the city, and he required everyone to report to the police daily.

The Superintendent of Police began to arrest those who had been seen with Booth. The police started searching their homes and brought others in for questioning. Several spent time in prison, several served as witnesses, and one stood accused at the conspiracy trial.

Bogar reveals the details of what happened to each one of the forty-six cast and crew members during the investigation, the trial, and the remainder of their

lives. He found it easier to track actors and managers who stayed in their line of work. Stagehands proved hard to track, and some seemed to disappear. In the 1920s, the newspapers focused on the nine actors who were still alive to see who would be the last survivor. The program boy, who had been eleven that night, was the last to die in 1936. “To his death, he maintained that John Wilkes Booth did not die in that burning barn but escaped to South America, returning years later to Enid, Oklahoma, under an assumed name, eventually confessing his crime and true identity just before ending his life with arsenic” (p. 292).

This was a fascinating, well-written book, covering a part of the assassination story that has been overlooked by earlier historians. Those interested in Lincoln would benefit greatly by adding this well-researched book to their libraries.