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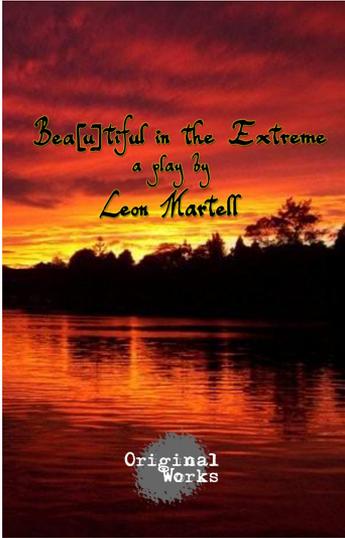
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*Finale*

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**Bea[u]tiful  
in the Extreme**

**By Leon Martell**

**Synopsis:** America, 1809. Barely in his thirties, Meriwether Lewis, with his friend and partner William Clark, had led an expedition across the continent and back. He was a national hero, the governor of the Louisiana Territory, and he killed himself. Bea[u]tiful in the Extreme, his own words

to describe the prairie, follows Meriwether Lewis as he wrestles the demons in his mind. Between the time of his first suicide attempt on a flat boat down the Mississippi, and his final self execution in an inn on the Natchez trace, Lewis relives the triumphs and trials of his epic journey. With Thomas Jefferson, his mentor, Sacagawea the native girl as his guide, and William Clark, his friend, anchor and in many ways soul mate, he struggles to find meaning in all he has seen and done. A warrior faces evil spirits, broken dreams, and politicians in his final battle. Whiskey, meat, laughs, and laudanum on the long trail to immortality.

**Cast Size:** 9 or more actors playing multiple roles

# **FINALE**

**BY IRA DAVID WOOD III**

FINALE premiered at Theatre in the Park in Raleigh, NC in 1987. It was directed by the playwright.

The cast was as follows:

Garrie Davidson: Eric Woodall

Edwin Booth: Roger Jones

John Wilkes: David Wood

Junius Booth: Jack Hall

Mary Ann Booth: Helen Crisp

Asia Booth: Liz Berry

Mary Devlin: Mary Rowland

Abraham Lincoln: Dan Martin

## **CAST**

EDWIN BOOTH  
GARRIE DAVIDSON  
JOHN WILKES BOOTH  
JUNIUS BOOTH  
MARY ANN. BOOTH  
ASIA BOOTH  
MARY DEVLIN  
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

## **THE PLACE:**

March, 1873 3:00 AM Basement of The Booth  
Theatre, New York City

## FINALE

### ACT I

*(Darkness. A door opens atop the stairway. EDWIN BOOTH appears on the top stairway landing. He is in a velvet dressing gown and holds a lighted candle. He cautiously makes his way down the stairs. It is obvious that he does not want to be here. He crosses to the large, bound trunk. Placing the candle on a nearby table, he sits in a large, throne-like chair and silently regards the trunk for a time. Slowly he reaches towards it with an unsteady hand. As he does, [SOUND] - a faint, lilting waltz is heard in distant echo. The music quickly fades into another SOUND of distant, haunting wind. His trembling hand finally comes to rest on the trunk's lid. At the moment of contact - JOHN WILKES BOOTH, dressed in black coat and opera cape, enters from the darkness. John is as we most often see him in photographs - dark hair, pale skin - very handsome. His eyes are his most arresting feature - smoldering with the fire of some desperate, unfulfilled passion. John regards his older brother silently for a moment.)*

JOHN WILKES: Is it such a tragedy, Edwin?  
*(Beat)* Oh, you play it very well. You always did. *(Beat)* In his rare moments of sober lucidity, Father even said so himself. Perhaps never to you. I heard it often enough. *(Pause)* I wonder what you really think. *(Another pause)* "We sit before the row of evening lamps, each in his chair, forgetful of November dusks and damps, and wintry air."

*(John crosses to a small basement window looking out onto the street at ground level.)*

JOHN WILKES: It's stopped snowing. *(Beat)* I used to love the snow.

EDWIN: *(Softly - to himself)* I can't.

JOHN WILKES: Did you know that when Senator Rufus Choate heard the news of Father's death, he threw open his arms in one great gesture of noble despair - right on the floor of the Senate - and cried: "There are no more actors!" And do you know what he said of us? "It is a great pity that eminent men should have such mediocre children." *(Suddenly)* It really isn't a question of going or staying. You're here, Big Brother. Took you eight long years to come down that stairway. Quite an entrance ... even for you. Were you that afraid of what you would find? *(Beat)* Don't look so sullen. The sun will rise, Edwin; no matter what happens here. The sky will change; shadows fade. Life goes on for the Dead as well as for the living. You did know that, didn't you?

*(GARRIE DAVIDSON, Edwin's valet, enters at the top of the stair landing. He is young and nervous. John Wilkes, invisible to Davidson, silently observes the following scene.)*

GARRIE: Excuse me. Mr. Booth. *(Beat)* Mr. Booth?

EDWIN: What is it, Garrie?

GARRIE: You asked me to fetch this for you, Sir.

*(Garrie produces a decanter of brandy.)*

GARRIE: Mr. Booth?

EDWIN: Well, come down! Come down. I hear you.

GARRIE: Yes sir.

*(Garrie crosses down the stairs.)*

GARRIE: You did tell me to fetch you a bottle, Mr. Booth.

*(Garrie sees the trunk and stops abruptly.)*

EDWIN: Bring. I asked you to bring me a bottle, not fetch it. Dogs fetch, Garrie; humans bring.

GARRIE: Yes, Sir. Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude.

EDWIN: Nothing to be afraid of. Just an old trunk full of dusty reminders. That's all.

GARRIE: Yes, Sir. I know. I've seen it here before. It's just that ... well ... it belonged to ... him, didn't it?

EDWIN: Belonged to whom, Garrie?

GARRIE: You know, Sir. Him.

EDWIN: You mean my brother ... John Wilkes Booth? Are you afraid to say it?

GARRIE: No, Sir. It's not that. Just didn't want to cause no ... unpleasantness. I know we don't speak of him here. Some things are best left forgotten.

EDWIN: Some things can't be forgotten. Nothing erases them. *(Taking decanter from Garrie)* Not even this. I should know.

*(Edwin places decanter on table next to lamp and indicates the trunk.)*

EDWIN: This trunk originally belonged to my father, Junius Brutus Booth. You're too young to have ever seen him perform onstage.

GARRIE: No, Sir. Never did.

EDWIN: Too bad. He was quite captivating. An erratic, temperamental ... towering presence of a man. John inherited the trunk from my father. I inherited it from my brother after ... when he died. Secretary Stanton impounded it. Held it under seal at the National Hotel for seven long years. Can't imagine why.

GARRIE: Will that be all, Mr. Booth?

EDWIN: What time is it?

GARRIE: Past three in the morning.

EDWIN: Go back to bed.

*(Garrie starts toward stairs, pauses.)*

GARRIE: You gonna be all right? Down here, I mean? With that?

EDWIN: Bolt the door behind you, Garrie. I'd rather not be disturbed again ... for awhile.

GARRIE: Yes, Sir.

*(Davidson starts reluctantly up the stairs.)*

EDWIN: Garrie?

*(Garrie hesitates and gazes back at Booth.)*

EDWIN: Thank you.

GARRIE: Yes, Sir.

*(Garrie EXITS. We hear the sound of the door being bolted behind him. Hold a moment - then ...)*

JOHN WILKES: That you choose to play your greatest scene to an empty house is so very like you, Edwin.

*(John Wilkes indicates the decanter of brandy.)*

JOHN WILKES: Did I say empty? I completely overlooked your greatest supporter and critic. Like father, like son. The Past never dies, does it?

*(A single shaft of light slams up, illuminating JUNIUS BOOTH on the lower stair-landing. He is a large, bear-like man. His eyes share the same fire as John's. He is drunk.)*

JUNIUS: *(Bellowing)* NO MORE ACTORS!  
D'you hear me, boys? No more actors in this family!

*(The two sons turn to face their father.)*

JOHN WILKES: It's what we do best, Father.

JUNIUS: How would you know? You've never tried anything else! I won't have my sons on the stage. You'll go t' school like everyone else! Be respected. Learn a decent trade! Apprentice in some useful occupation! Y' hear me?

JOHN WILKES: Did you see Edwin's RICHARD III? He was brilliant!

JUNIUS: See it? I'm the one responsible for it.

EDWIN: YOU? You were supposed to play Richard that evening yourself. It was YOUR production! Your role! *(To John Wilkes)* Only minutes before the curtain, he throws on his cloak and storms out of the dressing room in a fury.

JUNIUS: *(With a chuckle)* In a fury, was I?

EDWIN: Call it what you like. *(To John Wilkes)* When I asked him who would play Richard, he

wheeled around, pointed his finger at me and leered: "YOU! You play him!" (*To Junius*)  
And I did. And ... I was good.

JUNIUS: Johnnie says "brilliant."

EDWIN: To blazes with humility then! Brilliant!  
You were lucky I was there.

JUNIUS: Luck?

(*Junius roars with laughter.*)

JUNIUS: D'you hear him, Johnnie? Luck!

(*Junius wheels on Edwin.*)

JUNIUS: No such thing ... not in this business, boy! There IS plotting, planning, scheming, upstaging and knifing in the back. No luck! Ask Johnnie. He knows.

JOHN WILKES: I learned from the best.

JUNIUS: That's it! That's the boy! When I spit, spit back. Luck is a fool's dream, Edwin. All glitter. No substance. A dream of fools! Fate is for those who do nothing but wait for things to happen to them ... and grow old on the edge of their dreams. Life belongs to the takers! Always has. To the takers! Eh, boy?

(*Edwin crosses to John.*)

EDWIN: I'm sorry, Johnnie. He's been worse lately. I didn't want you to know.

JUNIUS: Know what? Today it is our pleasure to be drunk. That is what your older brother is trying oh-so-delicately to convey to you, my son.

JOHN WILKES: Again? Did you say "drunk again?" How can one be drunk again when one has never really been completely sober?

EDWIN: It's only that Johnnie's concerned for you.

JOHN WILKES: Let it be! Why shouldn't he hear the truth for a change?

EDWIN: Johnnie; please.

JOHN WILKES: Tell me ... Sir. Have we ever really known you when you were sober? Completely, sincerely, stone-cold sober? I would hate to think that we had missed so great a milestone in our lives.

JUNIUS: Careful, boy.

JOHN WILKES: With all due respect to your grand omnipotence, I am no longer a boy, Sir. I am a man.

JUNIUS: A man? Are ya now? My Johnnie's a man? *(To Edwin)* Did y'hear that? *(Back to John)* Because you can ride a horse, shoot a gun and bed a woman? A quarter of a century, boy, and you're not even dry behind the ears. *(Suddenly in grand theatrical character)* " ...

He hears no music! Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort as if he mocked himself and scorned his spirit that could be moved to smile at anything."

EDWIN: Johnnie, please. It's the whiskey in him.

JUNIUS: "Such men as he be never at heart's ease whiles they behold a greater than themselves, and therefore are they ... dangerous."

EDWIN: He doesn't know what he's saying half of the time.

*(Junius sprawls in a chair.)*

JUNIUS: *(Smiling)* Show me an actor who does!

*(Junius laughs and rises from the chair.)*

JUNIUS: And I do not need you to argue for me, Master Tressel. Blind, staggering drunk, I'm still a match for the both of you! Look at him. He knows it. *(To John)* You do, don't you, boy?

JOHN WILKES: For once ... just once ... could you see us as we are? Is that such a great thing to ask?

JUNIUS: What makes you think I don't? What makes you think I drink because it pleases me? Was the wind that took you away, wasn't it, boy?

JOHN WILKES: What wind?

JUNIUS: (*Gravely*) "Such wind as scatters young men through the world, to seek their fortune further than at home, where small experience grows." (*Pause - then softer*) Always was me, wasn't it, Johnnie? Whatever you couldn't have or accomplish in your life - your quiet desperation - always because of me. Well - "God save thee, my sweet boy - my king! My Jove! I speak to thee, my heart."

JOHN WILKES: "I know thee not old man - Fall to thy prayers; How ill white hairs become a fool and jester! I have long dream'd of such a kind of man, So surfeit swell'd, so old, and so profane; But, being awaked, I do despise my dream. Know the grave doth gape for thee thrice wider than for other men." I only wanted a father.

JUNIUS: Was that meant to hurt? Sounds good, Johnnie boy. Has that fine, solid ring of Truth to it. And your delivery! Tinged with just the right amount of emotion. "I could be well moved, if I were as you; if I could pray to move, prayers would move me."

JOHN WILKES: I wish ... you ... would ... die.

EDWIN: Johnnie!

JOHN WILKES: Why not? We've stood on ceremony much too long. If life bores you so much, why not take your leave of it?

JUNIUS: (*Grandly*) "Because I am constant as the Northern Star of whose true-fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament." Besides, no actor, worth his salt, would ever make an early exit.

(*Grinning and winking at John.*)

JUNIUS: Hamlet's only just seen his father's ghost on the battlements! That's no time to ring down the curtain, boy!

(*Junius leans towards John Wilkes with a large grin.*)

JUNIUS: Yessiree! Going to be ... a hot time ... in Denmark ... tonight!

(*Junius laughs, then turns immediately serious.*)

JUNIUS: Tonight, we earn our applause.

JOHN WILKES: Christ! I don't have to bear this kind of abuse every time we happen to be together. (*To Edwin*) I don't see how you do. (*To Junius*) We're not a family! We're a CHA-RADE!

JUNIUS: (*Unruffled*) Always said you had spunk, boy. Always said that. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son. Would God I had died for thee."

(*The brilliant light continues to bathe the great actor for a moment more. Then as it dims, Junius*

*fades away into nothingness and exits. Edwin and John - alone in the dark room.)*

EDWIN: Did you mean that? Do you honestly feel you have no family?

JOHN WILKES: Does it matter? Either answer will only grieve you. *(Suddenly smiling)* You're doing very well!

EDWIN: I've managed to survive.

JOHN WILKES: No small accomplishment for those like us! Think of it, Edwin. Your own theatre! The family name! New York City - Sixth and Twenty-third. Not bad at all! Immortality, Big Brother! Something to outlast you ... to be remembered for. Bricks and mortar! Something substantial.

EDWIN: Nothing's forever, Johnnie.

JOHN WILKES: Don't say that. Please.

EDWIN: It's the truth. I'm sorry.

JOHN WILKES: *(Bellowing)* Then lie to me! *(Immediately calm and polite once more)* It's much more pleasant.

EDWIN: I'm through with lies, Little Brother. I finished with them a very long time ago. Only one thing is left to do. That's why I've come down here tonight.

*(John gazes at Edwin quizzically for a moment, then ...)*

JOHN WILKES: Don't you think it a plague to be known as a good actor?

EDWIN: A plague?

JOHN WILKES: Offstage, I mean.

*(John Wilkes crosses to the basement window.)*

JOHN WILKES: Out there. In the world we imitate in our temple-theatres ... in that world where Man never approaches Man without deceit in his heart and "trust me" on his lips. It's extremely difficult to trust at all ... but to trust an actor?

*(John Wilkes chuckles and shakes his head.)*

EDWIN: Then merely trust a brother.

JOHN WILKES: All actors ARE brothers. What then?

EDWIN: You can believe ME, Johnnie.

JOHN WILKES: Ah! But do I want to? Dreamers never heed the careful advice of the realists. Simply the nature of things.

EDWIN: There was something that always came between us though. What was it? Do you know?

JOHN WILKES: I don't mean to sound callous, but I was never very concerned about it. Perhaps we simply grew apart. It happens.

EDWIN: This was different. Oh, there was the competition. But that was always there. Seemed healthy - at the time. I don't know. There was something else. Something ... sinister.

JOHN WILKES: Why do you choose that word?

EDWIN: Sinister? Because that's what it was ... what it seemed to me. Inherently ominous. I felt it. We both did.

JOHN WILKES: Isn't it enough that the world shall hate me forever? Must you as well?

EDWIN: I'm merely trying to ... make some little sense of ... life. To put it into some kind of proper ... perspective.

JOHN WILKES: Proper? How quaint.

EDWIN: Johnnie! Listen to me! I don't know what it is you want me to say. I can't change the Past! I don't even want to think about it any more than I have to! It is a terrible weight about my soul. I've seen what it can do. I have watched it pull so many others under. Unless I'm able to cut it away from me - the only way I know how - it'll drag me under as well. There's been enough suffering, Johnnie! In the name of God, it's time to make an end.

JOHN WILKES: You really want to believe that, don't you? That the Past can simply be - how did you say? - cut away? Fancy bit of surgery that! A slice here. A nick there. Poof! Cured! And I thought you were the realist.

EDWIN: I would never have waited these eight long years if I thought this was going to be easy. But anything, Johnnie -- anything will be better than the present suffering.

JOHN WILKES: Oh, yes! Do tell me about suffering, Edwin. About the terrible cross YOU bear. Tell me how they hunted YOU in the night. When did they snare YOU like a wounded animal in a cruel trap, surrounded by snarling dogs gone mad with the scent of a kill? Show me your wounds, Edwin! Where are your scars?

*(John Wilkes stretches his hand towards Edwin.)*

JOHN WILKES: Come down from Elsinore, Hamlet! You're trying to teach the teacher!

EDWIN: What about those you left behind? Can you honestly believe they were without their suffering? Do you suppose we were spared? Did you ever once pause to think before you ... did what you did ... of your family? Mother? Asia? June? Joseph? Rosalie? Did you even once entertain a thought as to what the consequences of your actions might possibly mean to them? If it's wounds you want, Johnnie, or

scars you care to see, then look to those you left behind! Look to your family and what you did to THEM! TO US! How can you think we were spared our own agonies?

JOHN WILKES: I think, Big Brother, that you do not know the meaning of the word.

EDWIN: (*Turning away and starting for the stairs*) I can't. I can't do this! I should never have come down here. I'm sorry.

JOHN WILKES: You knew it would be painful.

EDWIN: Not like this.

(*Edwin starts up the stairs.*)

JOHN WILKES: You were so close! You were, Edwin! (*Suddenly pleading*) Don't leave me!

(*Edwin pauses.*)

JOHN WILKES: Don't ... send me back. No matter what I did or became, I'm still your brother. We loved each other once. (*Brief pause*) Please, Edwin. Do you want me to beg you?

EDWIN: It hurts so much, Johnnie. I'd hoped the wounds would have healed by now ... at least a little.

JOHN WILKES: There's no such thing as forgotten sorrow.

EDWIN: Sometimes I feel as though my heart will ... explode ... burst apart with what I hold there.

JOHN WILKES: Then free it. Free yourself. Open the trunk, Edwin. (*Pointing*) Open the trunk.

*(John slowly steps backwards into the darkness and vanishes. Edwin turns slowly and stares at the trunk. The faint waltz music is heard again, but fades just as suddenly. Edwin walks to the trunk and begins to unfasten the bindings. Slowly, he lifts the lid. As he does, MARY ANN BOOTH, Edwin's mother, enters from the darkness. She carries freshly laundered linen napkins, which she neatly folds and stacks during the following scene. The lighting in the basement begins a slow and subtle shift. The set pieces and shadows begin to fit together in some sort of strange, shadowy suggestion of the Booth's home.)*

MRS. BOOTH: Edwin! How many times have I told you to stay out of your father's things? He'd be furious if he knew you were rummaging again.

EDWIN: Doesn't matter now, Mama.

MRS. BOOTH: Not now, perhaps. But later - when he gets home. You know everything has been placed in that old trunk just so. Right there when he needs them again. Don't you dare go and misplace a single thing. I mean that, young man. We'd both be made to suffer and I am not going to go through all that again.

EDWIN: No, Ma'am. Never again.

MRS. BOOTH: Where's your brother? Where's precious Johnnie? And that sister of yours? I know! Off somewhere with their heads together. Thick as thieves, those two. I suppose I should be grateful you amuse yourself so quietly the way you do.

EDWIN: I enjoy it.

MRS. BOOTH: Well, it's a puzzle to me. You, who couldn't sleep one night alone in your room when you were small. Always afraid of the dark. Terrified at the thought of being left alone in the dark.

EDWIN: It always reminded me too much of Death.

MRS. BOOTH: Edwin Booth! What in the world makes you say a thing like that?

EDWIN: Because I believe that Death, if it is like anything we know in the living world, is like ... the dark. We can't see or know what inhabits it ... until, of course, we become part of it ourselves.

MRS. BOOTH: Well, it's certainly obvious something changed your mind.

EDWIN: Yes.

*(Edwin smiles at some secret thought. Mrs. Booth stops her busy work and looks at him with a puzzled expression. Sensing it, he smiles at her.)*

EDWIN: Theatres are dark.

MRS. BOOTH: Well ... still in all, too much brooding alone by yourself just isn't healthy. You ought to be outside, Edwin, in the sunshine with your other friends. What you find to gaze at in that musty, old thing is beyond me.

EDWIN: Mama?

MRS. BOOTH: If it wasn't so precious to your father, I'd have gotten rid of it long ago; and that's the truth.

EDWIN: Mama?

MRS. BOOTH: Hmm?

EDWIN: May I have it ... one day?

MRS. BOOTH: Have what?

EDWIN: This. I'd like to have it, one day, for my own.

MRS. BOOTH: Edwin Booth! That old thing? Now what in Heaven could you possibly want with that?

EDWIN: It's special ... to me.

MRS. BOOTH: Those few old costumes and prop pieces? You can't be serious! Besides, Johnnie's going to be the actor in the family. Don't you think he should have them? You know how badly your father wants you to be a carpenter.

EDWIN: Carpenter?

*(Edwin rises and move to his mother.)*

EDWIN: Mother, you know that's out of the question. You know it.

MRS. BOOTH: It's a decent profession.

EDWIN: Jesus Christ started out as a carpenter, Mama. Even He changed occupations.

MRS. BOOTH: Edwin Booth! I'll not have such talk in this house.

EDWIN: How could I think of being anything else but an actor?

MRS. BOOTH: *(Softening)* I know. I know. Lord knows you've been around it all your life. No small wonder you spend so much time off to yourself. Still, Edwin, is it so wrong for a father to ask his son to learn a decent trade?

EDWIN: For MY father to ask of ME, yes; it is. I am an actor. It's in my blood! My soul. It was a decent enough trade for father. Why not for me?

MRS. BOOTH: Fathers always want better lives for their sons. Why should yours be any different?

EDWIN: Why not a better life for Johnnie, then? Why am I the lucky one?

MRS. BOOTH: Perhaps your father thinks you've more common sense than your brother.

*(Mrs. Booth moves to Edwin.)*

MRS. BOOTH: Oh, Edwin, you know what I mean. Do you remember what the writer, Walt Whitman, said about your father? " ... To the forming of an artist of the very highest rank, a dash of insanity is indispensable." There's a streak of madness in Johnnie. Just like your father. They both have it. Born with it. Perhaps it takes that special streak of madness to be a great actor. I don't know. Besides, you're the thinker in the family, Edwin. Always quiet and brooding.

*(Turning, she begins to walk away.)*

MRS. BOOTH: The simple truth is - you weren't born with that streak of madness. And you may thank God for it.

EDWIN: Is that a polite way of saying I'm simply less talented?

MRS. BOOTH: Edwin! For Heaven's sake! You know that's not what I meant.

EDWIN: Do you think I am talented enough to make a career of it? You've never said, you know?

*(There is a faint noise from the darkness.)*

MRS. BOOTH: I believe I hear your father. What time is it, anyway? I've lost all track lately. I declare I don't know what in the world I'm thinking of!

EDWIN: You didn't answer my question, Mama.

MRS. BOOTH: Wash your hands now. I'll have supper on the table in a few minutes.

*(Hurrying out of the room.)*

MRS. BOOTH: And, please don't be late, Edwin. You know how your father is.

*(Mrs. Booth exits. Edwin is alone - standing near the trunk. The footlights rise - casting strange, unreal shadows on the back wall. SOUND of distant wind rises faintly. Garrie appears in an eerie pool of light. This time, he is dressed in the uniform of a telegram boy. His manner is also different. His face is ashen white, his movements stylized. There is something sinister about his quietness. He is almost an animated corpse.)*

GARRIE: Telegram for you, Mr. Booth.

*(Pause)*

GARRIE: Mr. Edwin Booth?

EDWIN: *(As if waking from a dream)* Yes?  
What? What is it?

GARRIE: Telegram for you, Sir.

*(Edwin glares suspiciously at Davidson for a moment, then evenly.)*

EDWIN: Couldn't you have waited just a little longer?

*(He indicates the table - in resignation.)*

EDWIN: Put it there.

GARRIE: Of course, Mr. Booth.

*(Garrie continues his cross to the table - pauses - turns back to Edwin.)*

GARRIE : Don't you ... want to open it, Mr. Booth?

*(Edwin tenses and glares at him.)*

GARRIE : I'll leave it here for you then. Good day.

*(With a sinister grin, Garrie bows and exits. With trembling hand, Edwin opens the brandy, pours some in a small glass. Raising the glass, he observes the liquid silently for a moment. His second hand grips the glass to steady it. He drinks and pours himself another. He then places the full glass on the table and reaches into the trunk. He*

*gently withdraws a robe. He stands, holding it out at arm's length. Another single shaft of overhead light slams up - illuminating Junius who stands Stage Right.)*

JUNIUS: Shylock!

*(Another shaft of overhead light rises, revealing John - who stands Stage Left.)*

JOHN WILKES: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE!

EDWIN: I remember.

*(Edwin throws the cloak around his shoulders. A pool of light slams up on him.)*

JUNIUS: *(In character)* "You have among you many a purchas'd slave, which, like your asses, and your dogs, and mules, you use in abject and in slavish parts. Because you bought them."

EDWIN: "Shall I say to you, let them be free, marry them to your heirs? Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds be made as soft as yours, and their palates be seasoned with such viands? You will answer ... "

JUNIUS & EDWIN: "The slaves are ours!"

JOHN WILKES: "So do I answer you! The pound of flesh, which I demand of him, is dearly bought; 'tis mine, and I will ... have ... it; If you defy me ... fie upon your law!"

*(ASIA BOOTH, Edwin's sister, enters in a huff from the darkness beyond.)*

ASIA: John Wilkes!

*(The lights begin another subtle change in the basement - creating the effect of a garden. The SOUND of birds chirping is faintly heard. The feeling is one of a backyard garden on a summer day.)*

ASIA: Where have you been? I turn my head one minute and you disappear. Just like that!

JOHN WILKES: I came down here to see Edwin.

ASIA: Well, you might have said something to me.

*(She glances down and sees the open trunk. Her mouth falls open with a gasp. She crosses to the trunk.)*

ASIA : Edwin Booth! Papa's going to wear out your backside with his razor strap when he finds you've been into his things again.

EDWIN: Asia, please. I've already been through it all with Mama.

ASIA: Oh! Well, that's different. As long as somebody warned you. What you do after that is up to you. I just hate it when they say: "You're his sister. Why didn't you stop him?" Now I can say: "If he won't listen to Mama,

what makes you think he'll pay one bit of attention to me?" Anyway, I've been dying to know what's in there myself!

*(She peers into the trunk. John playfully tips the lid closed. )*

ASIA: And ... speaking of attention, Mr. John Wilkes Booth... you left much too soon. That sweet, little minister's daughter, Miss Jenny Lou Harris? She came strolling past our front porch accidentally on purpose just a little while after you left. Told me she couldn't find her little doggie again. Now, how many times is it she's lost that dog this week? And always when she thinks you're going to be out in the front yard when she comes looking. She probably locked the poor little thing up in her family's chicken coop again like before.

JOHN WILKES: She may not be exactly original, Asia; but her heart's certainly in the right place.

ASIA: Miss Jenny Lou's heart, as anyone with eyes can plainly see, is exactly where you want it. In your hands! And HER ... standing there under that parasol, batting those heavy eyelids as hard as she could. Well, it was all quite wasted on me, I can tell you.

JOHN WILKES: I would appreciate it, Asia, darling, if you wouldn't be quite so hard on Miss Harris. She happens to be quite a ... talented ... young lady.

ASIA: John Wilkes! You ought to be spanked!  
And Jenny Lou a minister's daughter!

JOHN WILKES (*To Asia with a smile and a wink*) All the more reason for her to exercise her ... talent ... whenever the opportunity arises. I consider myself a missionary in this case ... a position I find myself in rather often. Besides, I'm sure you would never want Miss Jenny Lou to hide her candle under a bush, now would you?

ASIA: I believe, Sir, the word is bushel.

(*Asia flicks open her fan to "punctuate" the last word of the previous sentence.*)

ASIA: And please let me move to this side of the trellis so I will not be singed by the lightning. God is most certainly going to send down here to strike you dead with! You are absolutely scandalous. Isn't he scandalous, Edwin?

EDWIN: Miss Jenny Lou evidently doesn't think so.

ASIA: Oh, you're no help. You'd take up for him no matter what. And speaking of scandals, Sir. Isn't it about time you got into a few yourself?

EDWIN: (*Coming down the steps to Asia*) What?

ASIA: Well, I am certainly not asking you to use Johnnie as an example ...

JOHN WILKES: He could do worse.

ASIA: ... but isn't it about time you, at least, began a little browsing? My Lord, Edwin! Three little words! Three little words and you could have any woman in the world!

EDWIN: What three words? "I love you?"

ASIA: No. The other three words: "I'm an actor."

EDWIN: I see.

ASIA: Having a scandalous past is almost expected in your profession. Not only that ... you're practically forgiven for any indiscretion you could possibly commit. Besides, you're not getting any younger.

EDWIN: Marvelous reason to stampede into marriage, Asia.

ASIA: Edwin, you haven't come close to "stampede" yet. You're not even up to a brisk shuffle. Never mind. You know what I mean. Having a career in the theatre is one thing, but eating it and drinking it twenty-four hours a day is simply too much ... for anyone.

EDWIN: Why don't I just take the women Johnnie tosses away.

ASIA: Oh, you are absolutely impossible! Both of you! I don't know why I even try to give you good advice. *(To John)* Well, please excuse

me, John Wilkes. I believe I will go help Miss Jenny Lou look for that precious little puppy ... one more time this week! Don't thank me. It's why God gave men sisters: To come up with their excuses!

*(Asia exits.)*

EDWIN: I don't know what we would have done without her - or June and Rosalie. Mama couldn't have made it through without them.

JOHN WILKES: Yes; well that's what a family's for, isn't it? To help you through the bad times?

EDWIN: There were days when I didn't think any of us would survive. It was so tragic, Johnnie.

JOHN WILKES: *(Suddenly)* Do you remember your first time on a stage? Your first professional job?

EDWIN: There was a time we couldn't even walk safely on public streets. No actor could.

JOHN WILKES: I remember my first professional role well enough. Philadelphia. Victor Hugo's LUCRETIA BORGIA! God!

EDWIN: Asia was eight months pregnant when they took her away to be interrogated. We thought for a while she might lose the baby.

JOHN WILKES: I had only one line in the entire play. One line! "Madame! I am Petruccio

Pandolphe." I couldn't get it right for the life of me! "Madame! I am Pondolfio ... Pet ... Pedolfio ... Pantuchio ... Ped!" Finally, I simply turned and blared: "Well, damn it! Who the hell AM I?" The audience dissolved! Absolutely dissolved! So did I!

*(John Wilkes laughs, then grows immediately serious.)*

JOHN WILKES: You see ... it's a pleasant thing to remember the happy times, Edwin.

EDWIN: Not all of them were happy, Johnnie. Shouldn't we talk about the bad times as well?

*(John points to the nearby table)*

JOHN WILKES: Very well. Open that telegram!

EDWIN: *(A pause, then softly)* No.

JOHN WILKES: Then don't pretend to want to bring up unpleasant memories.

EDWIN: I opened the trunk. I've begun at least. That's something.

JOHN WILKES: Yes. You have indeed. You have begun. Prologue complete. Exposition taken care of.

*(John lifts the glass of brandy.)*

JOHN WILKES: Props all in place. The rest of the ensemble waiting in the wings ... silent ... expectant. The air stills. The stage, as we say, is set. Now! What shall we play? Comedy? Tragedy? What is your pleasure?

*(Edwin glares at John Wilkes and downs the shot of brandy. He carefully replaces the glass on the table and traces its rim with his finger for a moment.)*

EDWIN: History. Let's perform a history, Johnnie.

*(John winces visibly and turns away.)*

EDWIN: You don't seem exactly ecstatic over the choice.

JOHN WILKES: Oh ... dreadfully dull, histories. Never cared much for them personally.

EDWIN: *(A touch of cruelty in his voice)* Nonsense, Johnnie. Some of your best work was in histories, wasn't it?

*(John Wilkes turns on Edwin - his eyes blazing.)*

JOHN WILKES: You think I won't do it, don't you? That's what you're hoping, isn't it? *(With soft menace)* I will match you, Edwin, my brother, scene for bloody scene and line for bloody line.

*(The two brothers glare at each other in silence.)*

EDWIN: Good.

*(Edwin strides to the trunk and withdraws a stage sword. Holding it, he smiles at John Wilkes.)*

EDWIN: "And damned be him who first cries:  
"Hold! Enough!"

*(Edwin tosses the sword to John Wilkes, who catches it and grins.)*

JOHN WILKES: "Damned be him!"

*(A pool of brilliant light slams up on Edwin.)*

EDWIN: *(Gleefully)* "The brightest heaven of  
invention," Johnnie!

*(Another pool of light slams up on John.)*

JOHN WILKES: "With princes to act!"

EDWIN: The brothers Booth!

JOHN WILKES: The way it used to be!

EDWIN: "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

*(The lights slam out on Edwin and John and immediately - another pool of light rises on Garrie - as the telegraph boy. Garrie is positioned at the top of a stairway. He comes down the staircase - his eerie gaze riveted on Edwin. He holds up a second telegram.)*

GARRIE: Telegram, Mr. Booth.

EDWIN: Not now! Not yet!

JOHN WILKES: "If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not to come it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all."

GARRIE: Mr. Booth ... shouldn't you ... ?

*(Edwin is glaring at Garrie.)*

EDWIN: Not NOW! I'm not ready yet! Leave it there and get out! Get OUT!

GARRIE: As you wish.

*(Garrie places telegram on table with the first telegram, turns to smile at Edwin, bows and exits.)*

JOHN WILKES: You'll have to, you know ... sooner or later.

EDWIN: Everything to its season. Where were we?

JOHN WILKES: Choosing weapons, I believe. Yours was history.

EDWIN: Yes. Well, when your opponent is familiar with you, expect him to know where to drive the dagger deepest.

JOHN WILKES: So - let us then " ... talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs; Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes write sorrow on the bosom of the earth."

EDWIN: "And nothing can we call our own but death, and that small model of barren earth which serves as paste and cover to our bones."

JOHN WILKES: As you say.

EDWIN: In that case, I give you ..."JULIUS CAESAR." The role of Brutus.

*(John Wilkes stiffens.)*

EDWIN: It fits you, Johnnie. It fits you so very well.

JOHN WILKES: You're good. You're very good. You actually mean to go through with this?

*(Edwin only glares at him.)*

JOHN WILKES: Very well, dear brother. Histories for me. Something closer to the heart for you.

*(John Wilkes thinks for a second, then smiles a wicked smile.)*

JOHN WILKES: From one familiar opponent to another; I give you ... ROMEO AND JULIET.

*(Edwin winces. His reaction is physical - almost as if someone has hit him in the stomach. He turns away from John - who, seeing this reaction, immediately rushes to him and grabs his brother by the shoulders.)*

JOHN WILKES: What is it, Edwin? Something wrong? No! Don't look away, Big Brother. Keep your eyes on mine!

EDWIN: Why?

JOHN WILKES: Eyes are the windows of the soul. And I wish to see every bit of the pain reflected in yours.

EDWIN: You won't have to look deeply.

*(John Wilkes softens slightly.)*

EDWIN: I'm afraid I shall make winning much too easy for you.

*(John Wilkes reels like a mad man.)*

JOHN WILKES: No! I forbid you to elicit pity! No cheap theatrical tricks here! Whatever sympathy you receive this night, you will earn! I shall say farewell to Caesar ... if you bid your precious Juliet good bye forever.

*(John spreads his arms wide, throws his head back and bellows:)*

JOHN WILKES: Forever!

EDWIN: Well done, Johnnie.

JOHN WILKES: *(Composing himself with a deep bow)* Thank you. We tend to forget that the daggers we wield are often double-edged.

*(Spreading his arms dramatically)* "And let the gods so speed me as I love the name of honour more than I fear death."

*(John Wilkes grabs the decanter of brandy and holds it out to Edwin.)*

JOHN WILKES: More courage? You're going to need it.

*(Edwin turns away.)*

JOHN WILKES: It will not be painless, Edwin. This sort of thing never is. Have you considered how terribly agonizing Memory is going to be? "For within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps death his court, and there the antic sits, scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp, allowing him a breath ... a little scene ... "

EDWIN: That's enough! For God's sake, stop it! Now! No more pretense! We both know why we're here. In the name of God, then, make it clean! Strike at the heart and be done! Enough blood will flow before we're finished ... enough carnage without this ... mockery.

*(John considers Edwin's words silently for a moment. Then, with a slight smile, he indicates a darkened area of the room.)*

JOHN WILKES: As you will.

*(John spreads his arms. SOUND of lilting music rises softly. [A Strauss waltz] A light also rises, shining from offstage - a light spilling in from a doorway. From the room beyond, mingled with the music, we hear the SOUNDS of people talking and laughing. A party! In another moment, Asia, in a party dress, comes out and crosses to the two brothers. Edwin removes his dressing gown and puts on an evening coat that hangs nearby.)*

ASIA: I might have known! The grandest party of the year going on just inside those doors. People! Important people! Important beautiful people! All of them full of sighs and whispers about the dark and mysterious Booth brothers. And where are they? The dimmest, farthest corner ... away from everything!

JOHN WILKES: We merely stepped out for some fresh air, Asia.

ASIA: You two are the most exasperating men I have ever known! And wouldn't you know the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, made you both my brothers!

*(Asia quickly adjusts John's tie.)*

JOHN WILKES: We all have our crosses to bear.

ASIA: This is absolutely ill-mannered. You can visit with each other any evening, any day. With all the talk of war on everybody's lips, evenings such as these should be treasured all the more. For your own sakes, you could endure some of the hot air inside that room.

*(She adjusts the flower in Edwin's lapel.)*

EDWIN: Too stuffy ... like most of the guests.

ASIA: How would you know?

EDWIN: Asia ...

ASIA: No! I'm not going to hear another word.  
I'm taking matters into my own hands.

JOHN WILKES: Sounds desperate to me.

ASIA: Desperate times; desperate measures.

EDWIN: Asia! Dear God. Not another introduction!

ASIA: And what if it is?

EDWIN: It's only that I'm perfectly able ...

ASIA: Able, perhaps. But hardly willing.

EDWIN: God knows you've enough will for both of us.

ASIA: And you may thank your lucky stars that someone in this family was granted a bit of foresight.

*(Starting to go, Asia hesitates.)*

ASIA: Stay! Exactly where you are. Both of you.

EDWIN: Asia ... please!

ASIA: Both of you! I mean it.

*(Asia exits.)*

JOHN WILKES: All in favor of a hasty retreat signify by saying "Aye!"

EDWIN: Retreat? To where? We're surrounded.

JOHN WILKES: Never say die, Big Brother! We can make it over the garden wall and to the nearest tavern in twenty minutes.

EDWIN: Over a garden wall? In evening clothes?

JOHN WILKES: Edwin! Do you have any idea what's going to come through that doorway, on the arm of our sister, any second now? Some freckle-faced, buck-toothed, bespectacled and middle-aged school teacher! You will hear her approaching easily enough.

EDWIN: Oh?

JOHN WILKES: Definitely. She'll be dragging a rather noisy ball and chain behind her - trying as best she can to keep in out of sight before she claps it onto your ankle. If not retreat, the only other choice is suicide. Flee, brother! Flee!

EDWIN: *(In mock dramatic tone)* "One woman is fair, yet I am well."

JOHN WILKES: Oh, Christ.

EDWIN: "Another wise, yet I am well. Another virtuous, yet I am well."

*(MARY DEVLIN, a strikingly beautiful woman, enters with Asia. They pause, unseen by the brothers, and silently watch in amusement as the "performance" continues.)*

JOHN WILKES & EDWIN IN UNISON: "But till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in MY grace."

MARY: *(Continuing the speech)* "Rich, wise, virtuous, fair ... ."

*(The startled brothers turn to face Mary.)*

MARY: "... mild, noble, of good discourse and an excellent musician. Her hair shall be of what colour it please God."

JOHN WILKES: Or herself. "Vanity, thy name is woman."

ASIA: *(To Mary)* That, my dear, was my brother's rather feeble attempt at an introduction.

JOHN WILKES: Shakespeare is hardly a feeble attempt, Asia.

MARY: Perhaps she was referring more to the delivery than to the source.

JOHN WILKES: My God! It even thinks!

MARY: (*Still politely*) You should cultivate more friends who do. Who knows? You might even take up the habit yourself.

JOHN WILKES: "She doth teach the torches to burn bright!" Asia, whoever this creature is ... she's marvelous!

ASIA: (*To Mary*) I believe that was a compliment, dear. (*To her brothers*) This creature's name ... is Mary. Mary Devlin. Mary, my two oh-so-charming brothers, John Wilkes and Edwin Booth. If they look a bit shocked, it's only because they were expecting you to be a bespectacled school teacher.

JOHN WILKES: And may I say we've never been so happily disappointed.

(*He kisses her hand.*)

MARY: Thank you.

JOHN WILKES: Or so surprised in one as beautiful, so well versed in the classics.

MARY: The combination surprises you?

JOHN WILKES: Delightfully so.

MARY: (*To Edwin*) And you, Sir?

EDWIN: Surprised at the combination of Truth and Beauty? Not at all.

MARY: Oh? And why not?

EDWIN: (*Softly*) Truth IS Beauty, Miss Devlin.

ASIA: Well! The evening is just full of surprises, isn't it? Johnnie? Will you join me in a glass of punch?

JOHN WILKES: Only if there's room in the glass for both of us! (*Grinning*) Sorry. Couldn't resist.

(*He offers his arm to Asia. She takes it. He turns politely to Mary.*)

JOHN WILKES: Miss Devlin.

(*John bows grandly to Edwin*)

JOHN WILKES: Romeo.

(*Asia and John exit. Hold a moment - then ...*)

EDWIN: Tact was never one of my brother's better attributes, I'm afraid. I do hope you weren't offended.

MARY: Hardly. I'm well aware of your brother's ... literary reputation.

EDWIN: Johnnie? Literary?

MARY: (*Smiling sweetly*) Well, I do believe he IS mentioned in every woman's diary from Washington to Richmond.

EDWIN: (*Smiling back at Mary*) I see. Well, my brother has always adopted a rather patriotic attitude. Only, for Johnnie, it has always been a case of Life, Liberty and the Happiness of Pursuit.

MARY: And what about his older brother?

EDWIN: Ah, well! Women always fall in love with me at first glance.

MARY: Really?

EDWIN: Oh, absolutely. Their disappointment begins only when they take that inevitable second look.

MARY: I see.

(*Mary closes her eyes.*)

EDWIN: What are you doing?

MARY: One moment, please.

(*Opening her eyes, she gazes at Edwin and smiles.*)

MARY: There! That, Mr. Booth, was my second look.

EDWIN: And?

MARY: As you see. I haven't dashed to the door.

EDWIN: The evening's still young, Miss Devlin.

MARY: It is indeed, Mr. Booth.

*(For a moment they gaze at each other. It is a warm and comfortable silence.)*

EDWIN: Lovely evening, isn't it?

MARY: Very.

EDWIN: Very ... lovely.

*(Another pause - this one, a bit less comfortable for Edwin.)*

EDWIN: I enjoy lovely evenings a great deal. I find them ... completely ... enjoyable ... the evenings.

*(Still another pause. Mary is silently observing Edwin's discomfort with amusement.)*

EDWIN: Of course, mornings are quite nice too! Mornings! Yes. I enjoy mornings as much as the ... evenings.

MARY: And then, of course, there are the afternoons.

EDWIN: Afternoons! I quite agree. Afternoons. Wonderful times, afternoons.

MARY: They can be; yes.

EDWIN: Well. There! Didn't take long at all.