

Matilda Heron: The Best Camille

BY MICHAEL BURKE

Mid-nineteenth century New York City was a boom town for the theatre. Its *nouveau riche* were flourishing and had plenty of money to spend on leisure pursuits. While some were satisfied with low-level entertainment, others were attempting to improve culturally and demanded more sophisticated theatre. During much of the same century a large number of Irish-born people were coming into the city. Many of these impoverished immigrants brought flairs for music and dance, and some quickly found a niche in the theatre, both high and low. Some made fortunes from it.

These included John Brougham, William Niblo, and to a lesser extent, Fitz-James O'Brien. Along with the younger Ada Rehan, they would become well-known and highly respected New York celebrities. (And of course there was Lola Montez.) John Brougham was a versatile actor, playwright, and manager who owned his own theatre, Brougham's Lyceum. He branched out to publish a magazine, the *Lantern*, a weekly satire modeled after London's *Punch*. Brougham lived a long and full life, and before he died helped found the Lotos Club, a gentlemen's literary club still in existence. He also wrote an autobiography, *Life, Stories and Poems of John Brougham*. William Niblo, born in Ireland in 1789, came here as a child and apprenticed in a coffee house. He apparently loved his work, rose

rapidly, eventually married his employer's daughter, and soon took control of the entire operation. He expanded the coffee house into a full-scale restaurant, and then built an adjacent theatre.

The complex was known as Niblo's Garden, the most popular and innovative entertainment center in New York City. He produced a variety of shows, ranging from opera and ballet to black-face "Ethiopian" performances and everything in between—including New York's first musical comedy, *The Black Crook*. Despite the fact that Niblo was a benevolent and generous employer, he amassed a small fortune which he used as the basis for extensive philanthropy in his later years. Lola Montez's complex career ended



in New York, where she became a popular and financially successful performance artist – and later an even more successful lecturer particularly as an advocate for women's rights. Irish-born Dion Boucicault was a famous actor and playwright who, with his wife Agnes Robertson (a popular singer of Irish and Scottish ballads) became a major force in the New York stage theatre. The writer Fitz-James O'Brien was one of the most prolific theatre critics and wrote several successful plays. Ada Rehan, from Limerick, would become one of the most acclaimed

Photo: Matilda Heron was born in Derry, Ireland in 1830 and brought to the United States as a child. She saw her first play in 1847, and three years later made her stage debut in the Walnut Theatre in Philadelphia. Her acting in Philadelphia and elsewhere was recognized as impressive, and she was brought to New York as a leading lady by Thomas Hamblin, manager of the Bowery Theatre. Courtesy of Wellesley University.

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actresses of the 1890—and Sarah Bernhardt’s main rival. She had a long and prosperous career, which included a part written specifically for her by Oscar Wilde. Her portrait, painted by John Singer Sargent, is owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art today. Each of these theater people were important in their own right. But perhaps the most interesting and complex of the Irish-born performers to grace the nineteenth-century American stage was Matilda Heron.

A DARING REALITY

Matilda Heron was an actress whose erratic career mirrored an equally erratic personal life. Born in Labby Vale, Draperstown, County Derry on December 1, 1830, her father was John Heron and her mother was Mary Laughlin. Details of her early life are somewhat sketchy, but the Herons, Irish Catholics, while not impoverished, were holders of a small farm and lived an occasionally precarious existence. Matilda was the youngest of five children. Her mother died when she was two years old, and her father soon remarried. Sometime in the early 1840s the entire family immigrated to Philadelphia where John quickly prospered, becoming a lumber merchant and owning his own mill. His eldest son, Alexander, got in on the ground floor of the rapidly expanding steamship business and ultimately established the Heron Line of schooners, while his younger brother, George, became a ship’s captain. John, a widower again, managed to marry a third time before dying prematurely, but not before fathering a third son, John J. Heron.

After their father’s death, the family stayed together with Alexander as the head. They were relatively well off now, and Matilda (called “Tillie”) could attend private schools. Her

earliest memories, however, were of wanting to go into the theatre. While at this time an acting career was not a complete disgrace, it was not the ideal choice for a young lady from an upwardly mobile family. Nonetheless, Matilda was a very strong willed and hard working girl, and was determined to get her way. Apparently she and Alexander, with whom she had always been very close, quarreled over her ambition. But Matilda prevailed and began studying acting privately. She made her debut at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia on February 17, 1851. Reviews of Matilda’s performance that night were mixed, as would be the case throughout her career. Some critics praised her as a fresh new talent, but others seemed to think of her as nothing special. She joined the stock company of the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., playing various roles in repertory. She returned to Philadelphia where she appeared in John Brougham’s stage version of Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*, for which she received good reviews. She was noticed by Thomas Hamblin, manager of New York’s Bowery Theatre, who offered her a job. Thus began her New York career.

Matilda found steady acting work in New York, with the same type of critical reception, ranging from magnificent to mediocre. She found more consistent success in touring and did a six-month engagement at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston. Eventually, she had two agents working for her. One was a professional agent, George Lewis, and the other was Thomas McKean, who was also an actor, writer, and stage manager. They were looking for a play to be specifically written for her. This situation suggests that she had attained some level of fame. Fitz-James O’Brien had a long-standing fascination for Matilda, which was believed to have culminated in a brief affair (probably while he served as her press agent during a run of *Camille* in Boston). Even afterward, however, they remained steadfast friends, she being one of the most prominent mourners at his funeral after he was killed in the Civil War. O’Brien summed up his opinion of her acting style in one of his reviews:

Illustration:
Niblo’s Garden in New York City was created around 1830 by William Niblo, who immigrated to New York from Ireland early in the nineteenth century. He built a small coffee house into thriving entertainment center, creating an adjacent theatre in 1834 that underwent various stages of development and became the venue for several historic performances. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

*The woman dared to come in upon that painted scene as if it really was the home apartment it was represented to be! She did not slide in with her face to the audience and wait for the mockery that is called "a reception." She walked in easily, naturally, unwitting of any outside eyes. The petulant manner in which she took off her shawl; the commonplace conversational tone in which she spoke to her servant, were revelations... Here was a daring reality... We felt ourselves in the presence of an inspired woman!*¹

O'Brien continues his description of the actress elsewhere: "Miss Heron's figure was commanding, and there was a certain powerful light in her eyes that startled and thrilled; but there was none of the beauty of the 'favorite actress.' The conquest that she achieved was purely intellectual and magnetic."² Apparently her acting style was unusual for the time. She did not overreact to news, flail her arms about, or as we would put it today, "chew the scenery." The only reference that we have today to the prevalent acting style of her day can be in old silent movies where movement and gestures were exaggerated. She performed on stage in a perfectly natural manner. It could probably be called the nineteenth-century equivalent of today's "method acting."

WITH THE IRISH IN SAN FRANCISCO

Throughout her career Matilda suffered from recurrent eye infections, sometimes so severe she was not able to work. One was so bad it nearly caused blindness, and she was forced to return to her family home in Philadelphia to convalesce. Shortly after her recovery she determined to try her luck in California. Since there was a great lack of entertainment there, it offered a financially rewarding place for theatre people. In 1853 Matilda and George Lewis left for San Francisco. The ocean trip was long, and the horseback ride through Panama arduous. Lewis became ill and died on the ship in the Pacific Ocean.

Matilda had borrowed money to finance this expedition, and now she was to arrive in

San Francisco distressed, broke, and alone. She was ready to turn around and return home when she received an unexpectedly friendly welcome. Her reputation had preceded her. San Francisco was a frontier city starved for any entertainment, and the arrival of a famous actress from back East was a special event. In addition, there was a large Irish community there who looked forward to welcoming an accomplished artist and one of their own. Several young men got together to secure theatre bookings for her and also to ensure the houses would be full. On December 26, 1853, Matilda Heron appeared on stage for the first time in California, in one of her favorite roles, Bianca in Milman's *Fazio*. She was an immediate success, playing to packed houses and rave reviews. One of them, in the newspaper *Alta California*, was especially complimentary:

*She has not the least rant, but she is simple, intense, graceful and true to nature. Her acting is that which touches the heart.... The play of "Fazio" is in itself heavy, and only superior excellence can relieve it.... We mean to disparage no other actress when we say Miss Heron so far excels them all. We have no hesitation in saying that her first appearance was the greatest triumph ever achieved upon the stage in California.*³

While in San Francisco, Matilda did a benefit performance for George Lewis's widow and children, raising \$1,600.00. The owners of the theatre gave her a \$500.00 bonus, and several fans got together and presented her with diamond cross (later estimated to be worth about \$800.00). The ringleader of her benefactors was Henry Herbert Byrne, a young lawyer with political aspirations who was prominent in the local Irish community.

After her success in San Francisco, Matilda toured the rest of California, with the same results. In what seems to have been an impulse she yielded to the constant entreaties of Henry Byrne and married him in a secret ceremony in June, 1854 at St Patrick's Catholic Church in San Francisco. This decision was not very well



Illustration:
The Bowery Theatre was built at No. 46 Bowery in the mid-1820s. During the 1830s and 1840s it was managed by Thomas Hamblin who was responsible for bringing Matilda Heron to New York to perform on its stage. By the 1850s the theatre was staging plays and other performances focused on attracting audiences from newer American immigrant groups. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

thought out by either party. Matilda had no intention of giving up her career, and Byrne was by this time a district attorney, looking forward to political advancement in the West. Soon after the wedding, Matilda left for a sabbatical in Paris to hone her theatrical skills. She and Byrne agreed to a plan whereby they were to meet in New York City in two years.

Matilda Heron's acting career had alienated her from her family somewhat. This caused her some sadness, as she had always been close to her brother Alexander, now head of his own steamship company and patriarch of the clan. There is an uncorroborated story about their reconciliation. According to it, Matilda, while sitting in a theatre in Paris watching what was to become her signature role, was tapped on the shoulder and heard "Tilly, that's a play that would make your fortune, if you would translate it for America."⁴ She turned and saw her brother sitting behind her. On this auspicious day two life-changing events occurred: she and Alexander ended their estrangement, and she discovered the play *Camille*, which would bring her stardom and success.

Meanwhile, her marriage (hardly much of a marriage at all) deteriorated completely. Byrne did come to New York when she came back from Paris, but she was in Philadelphia at the time and he made no effort to contact her.

Matilda did a brief tour through Pennsylvania. Byrne followed her there, but when she took an engagement in Buffalo he abruptly left for California. Matilda returned to New York, and, upon the advice of Alexander, consulted a divorce attorney. There is not much information to explain their behaviors, but various stories seem to indicate gross miscommunication on both their parts and a marriage that never should have happened in the first place.

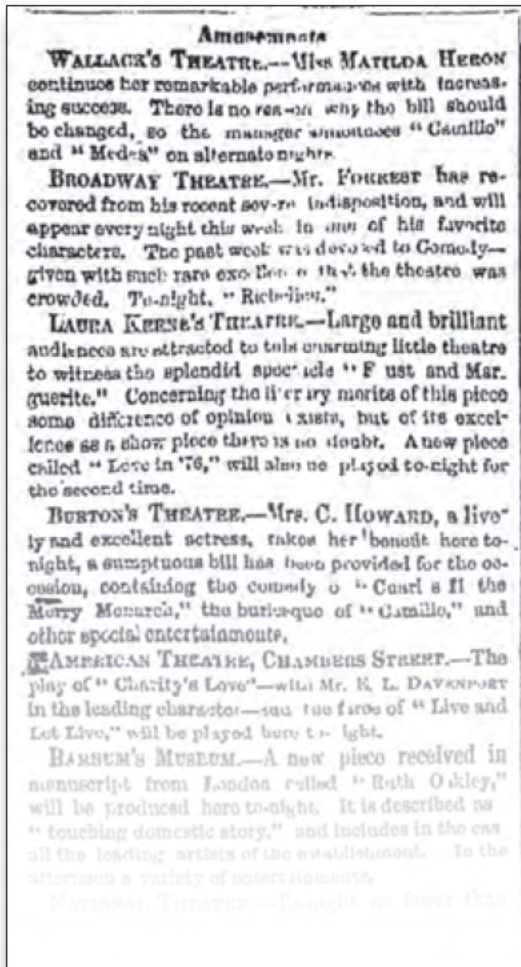
A GENIUS BEFORE THEM

The play *La Dame aux Camélias* was adapted by Alexander Dumas, fils (illegitimate son of Alexander Dumas) from his novel of the same name. The story is loosely based on a real person, a nineteenth-century French courtesan named Marie Duplessis. Although the play was controversial because it involved a prostitute, it was in fact a somewhat twisted morality play in which the prostitute "with a heart of gold" finds redemption in sacrificing her happiness for that of her lover. At the time, this play was considered too risqué even for Paris. The intervention of President Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, overriding the censorship laws, made the first production in 1852 possible. Taking her brother's advice, Matilda Heron translated the play and adapted it for American audiences (toning it down considerably to an acceptable level). It was renamed *Camille, or The Fate of a Coquette* and was presented first in Philadelphia, and then in New York City to generally favorable reviews. Several other versions quickly sprang up, but Matilda's play was considered the best adaptation and she, the best *Camille*. In 1857, a reviewer from the *New York Tribune* summed her performance up:

From the moment she entered as Camille...she...filled the stage." She exuded the electricity of genius. All the teaching, all the preaching...cannot elevate the common-place gift into that ineffable something called Genius.... Miss Heron had nothing to do at first but to enter, superfinely and well-dressed...but there was something about her a halo of individuality—a brilliancy of vitality which convinced everyone present...that

*the palpitating actuality of perceptive genius was before them.*⁵

A reviewer for the New York weekly, the *Spirit of The Times*, was even more taken aback:



*I went, and came away more infatuated than ever. There was no acting—it was all nature; and my heart ached at looking at the woman, as I thought all those thousand little evidences of love, those outbursts of passion, could never have been learned, or acted, save by a heart which had gone through a similar fiery ordeal.... No actress ever produced this effect upon me before, and no other, probably, ever will again. I have tried to analyze the causes of this great effect, and I can come to no other result than that "the Heron" must have magnetized, spiritualized, or bedeviled me in some way, for I am no longer a free man.*⁶

It was later estimated that over the years Matilda made over one hundred thousand dollars on *Camille* alone. Soon she was touring the country with it, and while she continued her other repertory, *Camille* would always be associated with her.

If Matilda Heron's stage career was replete with ups and downs, her love life seems to have been composed solely of downs. The conductor of the Gaiety Theatre where she was playing in New York was a young composer named Robert Stoepel. He became infatuated with Matilda and wrote two musical pieces especially for *Camille*. After one benefit performance he had the entire orchestra serenade Matilda outside her hotel room window. A romance soon began. She checked with her attorney, John Hopper, who assured her that her divorce from Byrne was final. On December 24, 1857, she married Robert Stoepel in St. Ann's Church in New York City. She was twenty-seven at this time and at the height of her career.

DIFFICULTIES AND STRESS

The marriage began to dissolve soon after their daughter, Helen (nicknamed Bijou by her mother) was born on September 1, 1863. One of the contributing issues, as with many marriages, involved money. It seemed Matilda made much more than Robert. Another, even more serious problem, was that Matilda actually never was divorced from Byrne, making her, in effect, a bigamist. Soon after her marriage to Stoepel, Byrne unexpectedly showed up. Matilda and Byrne also fought about money. Matilda had worked hard over the years and, although she was extravagant and a poor money manager, she had accumulated a fair amount of wealth on her own, exclusive of that from her family. She had a house on Thirty-fifth Street near Fifth Avenue and a country home on Staten Island. Stoepel sued her to force her to sell her properties and divide the money with him, claiming status as a business partner. It seems he feared that Byrne might make a claim on her property. Despite her feisty, strong-willed nature, Matilda gave in, and Stoepel ended up with everything. They also fought over their daughter, but she managed to hold on to her. During this time Byrne

Illustration:
A clipping from the New York Times (March 2, 1857) reflects the popularity Matilda Heron had achieved in the role of *Camille*. A reviewer for the New York Tribune wrote that her performance "exuded the electricity of genius." Courtesy of the New York Times.

died, so Matilda was no longer a bigamist. She tried to claim some of Byrne's estate, but his California lawyers opposed her vigorously and she ultimately lost.

With the stress of these marital and financial difficulties, her health began to decline. She quarreled with her friends. Her performances



suffered. She started giving acting lessons to supplement her income. Her behavior became more erratic, causing her to lose pupils as well as acting jobs. To add to her depression, her brother Alexander died in 1865. At one point, in 1867, she entered a convent to convalesce, putting Bijou in the care of a close friend. It was also said, but never proven, that Stoepel had her briefly committed to a lunatic asylum. As her physical and mental health was declining, she desperately looked for ways to shore up her career. She was preparing Bijou to take over the role of Camille, but as she was still too young, Matilda had trained a protégé, Agnes Ethel, to play the part in Matilda's style. She had separated from Stoepel, but they remained in touch despite their past differences, for the sake of their daughter. But at one point Matilda visited him at the French Theatre where he was then

working and living. She walked in to find him in bed with a young chorus girl. She then sued for divorce.

OH, I AM SO HAPPY!

Aware of her plight, her friends, led by the famous actress Laura Keane, got together to put on a theatrical fundraiser for her at Niblo's Garden. It was an artistic and financial success with several acting companies contributing, including those of John Brougham and James Wallack, a London-born actor who married the daughter of the famous Tipperary-born London actor, John Henry Johnstone, who was known professionally as "Irish John." Wallack came to New York and with his son founded Wallack's Theatre which became very successful. This event was a big financial help but also demonstrated the high regard in which Matilda's colleagues held her, despite her current circumstances. Nevertheless, her decline continued. She soon took to her bed, eventually having some undisclosed surgery, which probably made things worse. Bijou stayed at her side now constantly. Shortly before she died she kept repeating the words "Oh, I am so happy!" which were from Camille's last speech. Her own last words were "Poor Tilly never did any harm to anyone." Despite her two marriages, Matilda always claimed to be a devout Catholic and did receive the last rites from the Catholic Church. Before she died, however, she requested that her funeral take place at the Church of The Transfiguration, an Episcopal chapel usually referred to as "The Little Church Around the Corner." There was a wake held at her home, 132 East Twenty-fifth Street, that was packed with people, as was the small church. Many people had to stand outside, and the pallbearers had difficulty carrying her coffin through the dense crowd. The coffin bore two nameplates, one, "Matilda Agnes Heron, died March 7, 1877, aged 46 years," the other simply "Camille." She was then taken to Greenwood Cemetery where she lies under an elaborately carved Celtic Cross, inscribed "Matilda Heron Stoepel." Her beloved daughter, Helen, who went on to have a successful career on

Photo: Helen (Bijou) Heron was born in 1863 and was trained for the theatre by her mother. She went on to a career as a child actor and later married the Broadway producer Henry J. Miller. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

MATILDA HERON.

Now that Matilda Heron is dead, and she has ceased to be a target for the free pen of the critic, the theatre-goers of 20 years ago—those who saw her in the fullness of her career, when she was most powerful, and was encouraged and sustained by managers and admirers—will not withhold a sigh of regret at the thought of what this woman has achieved, resisted, and suffered. She began her career as an actress under discouraging circumstances, and fought against the obstinacy of her friends in the determination to cast her fortunes upon her natural ability to depict the human passions in their gentle as well as fierce moods; she bore bravely up against adversity when deserted by all, and suffered in her last days mental as well as physical pain which many strong men would have quailed before and sunk under. She was born in Lobby Vale, Draperstown, County of Derry, Ireland, and was brought to this country while an infant. She was early a diligent student, but while acquiring a polite education, and obtaining a taste for the dramatic writers, had not until the year 1847 witnessed a histrionic performance. While a member of a French academy, for the ostensible purpose of perfecting her elocution, the services of Mr. Peter Richings, then manager of the Walnut-street Theatre, Philadelphia, were engaged to give her lessons. During the term of instruction under this teacher her imagination became fired with the idea of adopting the theatrical profession. Mr. Richings, to whom she broached her plan, endeavored to dissuade her from adhering to it, and told her that she would but throw away time and money, as she had neither voice, liveliness of conception, nor dramatic fervor. Determined still, she again applied herself to her studies, and in a few months compelled her instructor to reverse his decision. For two years she studied most unrelentingly the characters of *Bianca*, *Julia*, the *Countess* in "Love," *Juliet*, and five others. Choosing *Bianca* for her first appearance, she was introduced to the public in the Walnut-street Theatre, in Philadelphia, on Feb. 17, 1851. She had been besought by her family to relinquish her purpose, but she could not be induced to recede from her position. Her debut was witnessed by a crowded house, and "Fazio" took on a new interest through her representation of the character of Bianca. From Philadelphia she went to Baltimore and Washington, meeting with some harsh criticism, but achieving a gratifying popular success. In Washington she met Charlotte Cushman, and played *Juliet* to that lady's *Romeo*. From Miss Cushman she received praise, but this praise was tempered with the injunction to work, and to this injunction Miss Heron replied with spirit that she was fully prepared to strain every nerve to win the goal she had in view. While playing soon after in the Chestnut-street Theatre, Philadelphia, she encountered Mr. Hamblin, Manager of the Bowery Theatre, in this City, by whom she was engaged as leading lady. Coming immediately to New-York, she worked diligently for a whole season, appearing in Shakspearean, melodramatic, and spectacular characters, and drawing none less than or above her audience. An affection of the eyes drove her from the stage for a time, but having had some repose in Philadelphia she came forth in the Arcus-street Theatre, under the management of Frederick & Hemphill, as *Rose Fielding* in "The Willow Copse." After she had accepted a six months' engagement in the Boston Athenaeum she was prostrated with illness, and on her recovery, after a space of about two weeks, met with some indifferent success in *Lady Macbeth* and *Julia*. In "The Hebborn," that her manager advised to cancel her engagement. She produced a satisfactory impression as *Julia*, in "Richelieu," but escaped gladly enough from the Athenaeum, and accepted an engagement at the National. Here she achieved a great success as *Uta*, in "The Soto." Her performance was so much admired that the expression was constantly heard when *Uta* expired in the fourth act, "The play is over; *Uta* is dead!" and the latter part of her audience continually repeated "If *Uta* could see us she would be proud to see us!"

Broadway as Bijou Heron, died in 1937, and is buried there also, along with Helen's husband, Broadway actor and producer Henry J. Miller.⁷ Curiously, Robert Stoepel, the cause of much of Matilda's suffering, and who went on to compose several symphonies and operas—and died in 1887—is buried there also.

Notes

- 1 "Mother of Pearl," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1860.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 *Alta California*, December 27, 1863.
- 4 Humble, Alberta Lewis. "Matilda Heron, American Actress." Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, 1959.
- 5 *New York Tribune*, January 23, 1857.
- 6 Porter's *Spirit of The Times*, February 14, 1857.
- 7 The Henry Miller Theatre was named for Henry J. Miller. Helen and Henry's son, Gilbert Miller, also went on to have a successful career as a Broadway and London producer, producing nearly one hundred plays, many of which were popular hits. He died in 1969, aged eighty-four, and his death made the front page of the *New York Times*.

Illustration:
Selection from the obituary for Matilda Heron published in the New York Times for March 8, 1877. Courtesy of the New York Times.

Additional Sources

- New York Times*, Matilda Heron Obituary, March 8, 1877.
- New York Times*, Matilda Heron's Funeral, March 12, 1877.
- New York Times*, Robert Stoepel Obituary, October 2, 1887.
- New York Times*, Death of Gilbert Miller, Stage Producer, January 3, 1969.