

Vaudeville and the Vaudevillains

SCARCELY ten years ago a trip to a vaudeville theater was regarded as a sort of slumming expedition; today no town is complete without a vaudeville house, and nearly everybody at some time attends a performance there.



Vesta Tilley

It has not only become our most popular form of amusement, but is attended each year by more people than any other kind of public diversion. The vaudeville theater is the people's playhouse. The reasons for this are that, first, it appeals to a great variety of tastes; and, second, the prices are reasonable. While the story of vaudeville, as we now know it, is not so long as the story of the legitimate drama, it has, nevertheless, experienced an interesting development.

Vaudeville really goes back into the centuries. Originally *Vau-de-Vire*, it was the name given by Basselin, a French poet of the fifteenth century, to his convivial songs first sung in the Valley of the Vire. Subsequently vaudeville came to be any short comic piece with song, pantomime or dance. In modern French poetry a vaudeville is a light, gay song, embodying satire or burlesque, sung by the common people to a popular air.

The forerunner of the present-day vaudeville performer, however, was the old-time minstrel who amused our fathers before and after the Civil War. Then came the concert-hall artist, who later appeared in what was known as the variety house. This got its name from the fact that it afforded a variety of entertainment, mostly singing, dancing and fun-making. These houses appeared during the opera-bouffe days when tights were necessary adjuncts of every musical show. It followed that the variety shows included many persons in tights. Those shows were something like the burlesque companies of today in which there are hefty Amazons carrying spears.

The Bills of the Early Days

IN THE early seventies Tony Pastor, himself a singer and dancer, introduced a form of entertainment that was a combination of the variety show and the concert-hall bill. The list of attractions, or bill, as it is called, always included two energetic young men, dressed in ruffled shirts and silk knickerbockers, who did an endurance clog-dance on a marble slab. Then there was a lightning-change artist, who came out bulging with clothes. She sang songs and scaled off her clothes at the same time. These garments were "trick clothes"—that is, fastened with strings which, when pulled, would release the whole suit. Under the outer dress was an evening gown, a boy's costume and, finally, tights. Other acts were an acrobatic turn, comical songs and an impersonation. Usually the bill was concluded with an "after-piece," in which most of the people in the bill took part.

In the eighties Mr. B. F. Keith introduced in Boston what came to be called the continuous performance. He cleaned up the performances and cleaned up the theaters and introduced a vaudeville bill which was an improvement on the old variety offering. It began at ten o'clock in the morning and lasted until ten-thirty at night. No matter what time you came in during these hours you would find something doing on the stage. Later, Mr. F. F. Proctor used this idea in his theaters in New York. The continuous performance was the first bid for the patronage of women



Ruth Allen

By PERCY G. WILLIAMS

and children, for it had "refined" acts. These were the first houses that used the word vaudeville.

Up to this time the variety bills had appealed especially to men and to a Bohemian taste. The Koster & Bial music hall in New York was run along these lines, and so was the Olympia, which had been opened by Oscar Hammerstein. Thus, at the end of the nineties, there were two kinds of variety or vaudeville shows: the continuous, which was attended mostly by women and the children, and the show of the Koster & Bial type, which appealed to the sporting element; smoking and drinking were allowed, and only one or two matinees were given each week.

I had started in the amusement business back in the seventies as a boy with Colonel William E. Sinn, a well-known variety theater manager in Baltimore. In the nineties I had two variety theaters and a summer resort. I then conceived the idea that a beautiful theater that was a compromise between the men's variety and the women's continuous vaudeville would succeed.

I also believed that two performances a day would be better in vaudeville than the continuous show. In 1900, acting on this theory, I formed a company that built the Orpheum Theater in Brooklyn, and began the "two-a-day" shows now generally given in vaudeville theaters. I permitted smoking in one balcony and called it a "smoking balcony," which is today a feature of many vaudeville houses.

The Neighborhood Theatre

MOST vaudeville managers then believed that one "headliner" was enough to carry a bill. I felt that every act should be a good one. The old bills had involved a weekly payroll of from \$1000 to \$1500. My first bill at the Orpheum cost \$3000. My friends in the business thought I was headed for ruin. They called it the era of frenzied vaudeville. But the people seemed willing to pay for it. I began to import European novelties, stars like Albert Chevalier, Alice Lloyd and Vesta Victoria.

In vaudeville you must always get fresh audiences, because with them you win regular patrons. For example, if I advertise Vesta Tilley I am bound to get to my houses people who do not ordinarily go to vaudeville, but who want to see a big star. Then they sit through the rest of the bill; they may like the house. Later, if they have nothing definite to do, they will go to a vaudeville show. It's like showing a good sample.

After building the Orpheum I invaded New York, with the result that, at the present time, I have eight vaudeville houses in the greater city. In the development of these theaters I had one object in mind, and this object, I think, is peculiar to vaudeville. To understand it, it must be borne in mind that a vaudeville feature cannot have a run like a play. You must change your bill constantly if you want to keep your clientele. Therefore my plan was to build theaters in various localities and draw each week on the people of that section. I call my theaters neighborhood theaters. There are many of them in London. I have a theater in the Bronx, Harlem, the upper West Side, two in Brooklyn, in East New York and at Greenpoint. I can keep an act going for seven or eight weeks on my own personal circuit. I arrange the bills so that each one has a particular appeal for the people of the locality in which it is played. Harlem wants more laughs than the upper West Side of New York, and so on.

As vaudeville has developed, so has the cost of operation greatly increased. In addition to a headliner, who must be a star, there must also be at least two features which may be headliners elsewhere. One of the rules in vaudeville, however, is, "Once a headliner not always a headliner." A successful bill today must have ten and, possibly, twelve acts. In many houses moving pictures are always given.

The moral side of the bill has improved, too. Repulsive acts have been cut out; feats that shock the audience are

barred; even the man who does a tramp act must wear a clean shirt, despite the fact that it is contrary to the ethics of the hobo.

The old-time weekly pay-roll for artists has grown from \$1000 to \$7000. Yet the value of these high-priced bills is not always appreciated, as an episode which I now recall shows. To celebrate the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Orpheum I put on what was probably the most expensive vaudeville offered up to that time. It cost \$9000 for the week. I got the best acts from every country and called it The International Topliners' Tournament. A week later I met a prominent Brooklyn business man on the street. He said to me:

"I went to your theater last week. Fine building."

"How did you like the bill?" I asked.

"Well, those were great moving pictures you had," was his reply. My \$9000 all-star cast had been wasted on him.

This brings me naturally to the subject of the vaudeville audience. Just as the vaudeville field and its people

form a separate and distinct amusement world, so is the vaudeville audience peculiar to itself. The regular vaudeville-goer is a keen and discriminating judge. What he wants,

summed up, is the greatest amount of diversified entertainment with the least possible pathos. "Cut out the heartaches," he says, "and give us a song and dance." He wants to be amused, not grieved; he goes to buy sorrow, not to praise it. Above all, he wants the optimistic, not the uplifting spirit. He has a fine scorn for the so-called "high-



La Petite Adelaide

brow" act; he wants no literature on his stage; he desires his entertainment straight and unadulterated.

All vaudeville bills are changed each week; hence the Monday afternoon audience is the critical one. Most of the regulars go then. They follow the various acts as a follower of the race-track watches past performances. They can tell you the form of every feature. Most of them have their favorites.

The vaudeville gallery god is as keen as his brother who fills the roost of the other theater. His is the real verdict. He knows when the heart-throb has the real thrill and when it is forced; and he is quick to express his judgment.

Laughs are the barometers of vaudeville acts. Sometimes when a turn is put on for the first time people are stationed out in the audience to count the laughs. It takes a good act to make a record of "a laugh a minute."

Why Vaudeville Enterprises Fail

HAVING seen what the really critical attitude of the genuine vaudeville audience is, you can readily understand why most legitimate managers fail when they try to become vaudeville managers. The vaudeville manager cannot just happen. He must grow up in the business, because it takes years of experience and contact to learn it. Take, for example, the cases of Mr. Keith and Mr. Proctor, my two principal associates. Mr. Keith began with a circus, and his first managerial venture was a "store" show with a fat baby as the main attraction; Mr. Proctor was a vaudeville artist himself. In short, the vaudeville manager must know the acts and what they are worth. He must be able to make up a bill that will have an appeal for many different kinds of people.

If the legitimate manager puts on a musical show he knows, in a general way, what his audience wants. He can estimate the amount of marcel waves and shapeliness he is to pass over the footlights. So he makes a production along these lines. But the vaudeville manager, on the other hand, must not only cater to the man who likes musical shows, but also to the man who likes impersonation, mimicry, athletics, juggling, illusion, farce or singing. He must provide amusement for everybody, because a Sunday-school teacher and a prize-fighter may sit side by

side in his house. Great discretion must be employed in arranging the bill. He cannot follow one dancing act with another dancing act, or one talking act with another act of the same kind.

Many legitimate stars share the manager's experience when they go into vaudeville. They have the idea that vaudeville is a haven for shipwrecked actors, and always a first aid to the star in distress. They find that they are much mistaken. Success on the vaudeville stage requires a peculiar talent. When you consider that the actor or actress must walk out single-handed and amuse an audience of twenty-five hundred people for fifteen minutes, you find that it is little short of a stupendous task. Stars that have delighted thousands when they had the background of a drama have failed utterly when they tried to go it alone. Hence the phrase, "taking a flyer in vaudeville," often becomes, taking a drop in vaudeville.

Yet no branch of the amusement field offers such opportunity for advancement of income as vaudeville. Some of the rises have been phenomenal. The first salary that I paid Emma Carus was \$15 a week; now she gets \$600. It has not been so long since I was paying Blanche Ring \$60 a week; now she gets \$1500. Alice Lloyd went from \$200 a week to \$1500. Clarice Vance, who is well known in vaudeville, started at \$30 a week. Her salary is now \$400. I might cite many others.

The big dramatic stars have found lots of easy money in vaudeville. We paid Henrietta Crosman \$2000 a week for exactly twenty-two minutes of work twice a day. Virginia Harned got \$2000 a week, and so did Williams and Walker. May Irwin drew down \$2500 a week in vaudeville. A few years ago we paid Henry Miller \$600 a week to do a sketch; now he could get \$1500.

The Pay Envelopes of the Stars

YET in vaudeville, as in most other things, big names are of no lasting value, unless the people behind the names can deliver the goods. The name may have some commercial and drawing value as it appears on the bill-board or the electric-light sign in front of the theater; but the wise audience inside soon finds out if it has artistic value. It might be interesting in this connection to say that a number of well-known dramatic and musical stars graduated from vaudeville. They include David Warfield, Montgomery and Stone, Jefferson De Angelis, Francis Wilson, Elsie Janis, Victor Moore, George Cohan and Nat Goodwin.

Vaudeville salaries range from \$100 to \$3000 a week. The average is about \$250. I suppose the highest-priced vaudeville artist in the world is Vesta Tilley, whom I recently brought over for a six weeks' engagement at a weekly salary of \$3000. Why do I pay her so much? Simply because she is alone in her class. There are other male impersonators, but none like her. It is like painters. There is only one Meissonier, despite the fact that many artists paint soldiers.

Other very high-priced vaudeville artists are Vesta Victoria and Harry Lauder. Each gets \$2500 a week. Many feature-acts get from \$800 to \$900 a week. Some of these are capsule comedies. An act like Maude Odell's, the English beauty who poses, gets \$800, and Annette Kellerman, who dives in a tank, now gets \$1500 a week.

There is no field where competition is livelier than in vaudeville. In the fixing of salaries there is this astonishing thing: the more desperate or hazardous the act, the lower the price it gets, as a rule. The man who may be shot out of a cannon or does some daredevil feat on the rope gets about one-fifth as much as the chap who comes out with a clever line of talk which shows off his specialty. I heard one of these men once say, as he stood in the wings: "That fellow has just risked his life on that bar for \$50 a week, and I am going outside with my swift conversation and get \$400 for it."

Vaudeville today depends less on acrobatic feats than the old variety shows. One reason why they are not so



PHOTO BY E. CRICKLING, BOSTON, MASS., U.S.A.
Mabel Barrison

well paid is that the audience does not understand the amount of skill required or the time involved in the training. I know of a certain vaudeville family that spent six years practicing a plate trick, as a finish for their act, which took half a minute to present.

Though the average vaudeville artist does not possess an assorted artistic temperament like her sister in the grand opera, she can, on occasion, make things lively for the managers. It is sometimes hard to keep the "headliners" in good humor. The electric sign in front of the theater is one particular source of trouble. Nearly everybody on the bill wants his or her name up in the lights. When there are ten numbers you may well imagine what the complication is. One New York vaudeville manager solved the difficulty by putting up part at least of the name of every one on the bill. The result is that his sign is like a blazing code.

The Longest Year on Record

THE distribution of dressing-rooms is another sore spot. Everybody thinks he is the star and wants the best room. Now we have half a dozen "star" rooms.

The average vaudeville performer follows the rule, "If you can't be a genius then be a specialist." He takes up one stunt and plugs at it. He sometimes finds his specialty by accident. Once, in order to keep up with a bad orchestra, a singer sang his song in a sort of monotone. It made a great hit. Ever afterward he sang his songs this way.

The vaudeville actor is much more thrifty than his colleague in the legitimate. You find the \$50 a week dramatic actor stopping at the best hotel in the town, while the vaudeville artist who gets \$200 a week is content to live at an actors' boarding-house.

The vaudeville actor has this advantage over the legitimate actor: he can play a season of fifty-two weeks each year, for the reason that as soon as the theaters or "hall-shows," as the circus men call them, close, the summer-garden or seaside parks open. I have known some vaudeville actors who played sixty weeks in one season. This is done by doubling up in a town—that is, playing engagements at two theaters in one week. One thrifty vaudevillian made sixty-five weeks one season in this way.

The vaudeville world speaks a language all its own. Here is a vocabulary of some of its choicest expressions:

- Headliner The strongest feature of the bill.
- Sure fire Certain of success.
- They died Failed dismally.
- A knockout Pronounced success.
- A riot Great success.
- To close the show To be the last on the program.
- To open or close in one To begin or close the act in front of the drop curtain.
- A comedy finish The end of an act which brings a laugh.
- A big hand Much applause.
- Working the curtain Hauling the curtain up and down rapidly in order to increase applause.
- Trick stuff Costumes or scenic effects worked by means of mechanical tricks.
- A lemon, onion or frost Failure.
- A pippin Success.
- Getting time Obtaining vaudeville dates.

Instead of writing letters many vaudeville artists carry on communication with each other by means of advertisements in various trade papers.



PHOTO BY OTTO SHAPIRO CO., NEW YORK
Willa Holt Wakefield

The so-called vaudeville "families," especially the acrobatic teams, are recruited from many sources. The nearest that some of them have to real family relation is fine team-work in their various stunts.

Despite the fact that there are always thousands of people eager and anxious to break into vaudeville, it is sometimes as hard for the vaudeville manager to get a big new act as it is for the legitimate manager to find a good play. Yet nearly everybody who knows how to use a pen is engaged in writing a play.

The whole world is combed with a fine-tooth comb for acts. We have agents in every foreign capital who report on all the music and concert-hall performances. I venture the statement that no matter what new sensational act might be put on in any part of the world next Monday night I would hear of it by cable the next morning. If the act happens to create a furore we do not wait to investigate but engage it by cable.

We are constantly in touch with people everywhere. There lies before me on my desk a letter which I have just received from a man attached to the American consulate at Shanghai, China. He tells me that a famous Chinese magician, Ching Ling Foo, who was believed to have been killed in the Boxer uprising, has turned up in Shanghai with a wonderful new act. Ching spent a season in the United States many years ago and made a hit. My correspondent at Shanghai tells me the terms on which the old Chinaman will come to the United States. This is only one way that I keep in touch with acts.

Every summer I go to Europe and visit the leading music and concert halls. I also go to the smaller places out in the provinces, because very often you can find a big act in a very obscure hall. I have one case in mind. One night I went to a concert hall at Salford, near Manchester. In the bill was a young man named Laddie Cliff. He sang several good songs and gave unusually good imitations of the English boy. I brought him over at a small salary; now he gets ten times what I originally paid him.

On one of my visits to a provincial English music hall I witnessed an amusing incident that involved two Americans. In the old days there was always a chairman in the English music hall who announced the various acts. A few such places survive. It was the custom for the performers to give him a tip if they wanted a particularly good announcement. Two Americans came along. They had not been told about the tip, so, when the time came for their turn, the old chairman gravely said: "Next, ladies and gentlemen, we will have the Brothers Brown, Americans. They say they are good. We shall see."

I make a note of every act I see in Europe. I take the name of the act, the place I saw it, the kind of act, the price I think it is worth, and whether it seems to be available for America or not. This book becomes a sort of handy guide to Europe's vaudeville attractions.

Much good vaudeville talent is available in this country. Yet only one out of every hundred skits offered to us is accepted. When people ask me how they can break into vaudeville I say, "Get a kit of burglar's tools."

When a Smile May Cost Money

THE man who books or engages a vaudeville act must never laugh. One small smile during a "try-out" has been known to send up the price of an act one hundred dollars. So the agents take no chances.

When I first commenced booking acts I took no one's word for anything, and it is only of late that I have entrusted the engaging of acts to others. I see all principal acts before I engage them; in some cases I see them several times.

Every Monday I make a tour in my motor car of most of my houses in Greater New York. I watch part of each performance. When the day is done I have obtained many ideas for improving and changing bills. Incidentally, I watch the audiences to see how various acts impress them.

Daniel Frohman once said that plays are not written but rewritten. The same is true of vaudeville acts. They are not built but rebuilt. After the first presentation a

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PHOTO BY BANGS, NEW YORK
Maude Fulton

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whole act may be made over. The lines that the authors think will create a laugh are sometimes very sad, and others that are regarded as merely incidental get the applause.

The writing of vaudeville skits and sketches has come to be a very large and important business. Many men not only make good livelihoods out of it, but some have grown rich. One of the best known is Will Cressy, who gets as high as \$1000 for a comedy sketch or playlet. The writer of vaudeville acts does not take the same chances as his professional brother, the full-fledged playwright. Like the vaudeville actor, he is thrifty. He writes for cash and not for royalty. The prices of vaudeville sketches—that is, for the literary or near literary end—range from \$50 to \$1000. Sometimes the vaudeville artist gives the author the idea and sometimes the author furnishes the idea. A sketch is often written about a man's specialty. One of the gold-mines in the vaudeville field is the little sketch that does not take longer than fifteen minutes to put on, and which, if successful, may run for five or ten years. The actor is often the author. Thus he gets all the proceeds.

Tabloid plays are a new but successful feature in vaudeville. They are rivals of the "original sketches," and simply consist of a whole play boiled down to fifteen minutes of acting. In short, they are the distilled essence of four or five acts.

Sometimes a vaudeville sketch that has been very successful is made into a play. There have lately been two notable examples of this. The Chorus Lady, by James Forbes, which had a run of a season in New York and is now in England, was originally a vaudeville sketch. The Round-Up, which is now in its second year, was at first a vaudeville act entitled The Sheriff, in which the author, Edmund Day, appeared.

The Vaudeville Clearing-House

The booking of vaudeville acts sets in motion a well-organized piece of machinery. It differs very much from the booking of plays. The manager of the legitimate house leases or owns the theater. All he has to do is to wear a dress suit every night, stand "out front" and watch the people come in. He takes the plays that the Theatrical Syndicate sends him.

The vaudeville manager, on the other hand, not only books his own acts, but he must know all about them. What is just as important, he must know his audience and what sort of vaudeville diet they want. He cannot sit back as the manager of the legitimate playhouse does and take whatever is sent to him. He would not last very long.

The progressive out-of-town vaudeville manager has a representative in New York, which is the center of the vaudeville world, whose business it is to keep an eagle eye on the vaudeville game. This representative goes to all the houses and watches the acts. If an act is to be tried out at a small town near New York he goes there. One of these representatives or agents may act as New York man for several houses.

He works in conjunction with the United Booking Offices of America, the name given to the vaudeville clearing-house which is controlled by Mr. Keith, Mr. Proctor, Mr. E. F. Albee and myself. It books the vaudeville business east of Cincinnati and has a working alliance with the Orpheum Circuit, which books the business west of Cincinnati. Through these combined offices flows the great bulk of the vaudeville business in this country.

In organizing and conducting the United Booking Offices, as they are more commonly known, our aim has been to concentrate and expedite the whole vaudeville business. Organization has taken the place of disorganization. The system is such that a manager can walk in any time and get a complete record of every vaudeville act on the stage. He can find out where it is that exact moment, where it has played and its remaining route, the salary, kind of act, and a complete set of reports of every performance it has given.

These reports furnish a concrete example of the way the business is now organized. Every Monday night, in every theater that we furnish with attractions, the manager

prepares a compact report of the new bill put on that day. Here is a sample of the report on an act:

Mabel Jones: sentimental songs; made a very pretty appearance; good hand (applause) after each number; act went very well; time, seventeen minutes.

Every report is indexed and is accessible at a moment's notice.

A vaudeville artist can come to our offices and in twenty-four hours can have his time booked for two years. This is done in conjunction with the various representatives and agents stationed in New York. Each one of these knows what open time his house or houses have. Mr. Keith, Mr. Proctor and I, alone, could book twenty-two weeks solid in our own houses. The United Booking Office books exclusively for more than one hundred houses, ranging from the Bennett Circuit in Canada to the Orpheum Theater in Atlanta.

The process of booking an act is very simple. The local manager in Trenton wires to his representative in New York to book a certain act. The representative comes to our office and finds that the act has the week of June first open. He then books the act on a form especially prepared for this purpose. On the form he stamps the exact time at which he books it. The time is stamped for the reason that another manager may want the same act—as it frequently happens—and wire for it. The first man in gets it. The booking slip is dropped in a basket which is emptied twice a day. The booking is then entered on a card. Every act in the country has a card in our offices, which states the kind of act, salary and route. There are blank spaces to be filled in with the engagements as they are booked. These cards are accessible to all the managers or their New York representatives. The reports which we receive each week on the performances are also accessible to them. As each successive week is booked, the place is added to the card.

The Poor Man's Club and its Future

The United Booking Offices charge a commission of five per cent on the salary for each act booked. This is the booking fee. The European agent also charges five per cent additional for foreign acts engaged for America.

My own belief is that vaudeville has just begun to come into its own. It is destined to a development that will almost put the legitimate playhouse in the background. I think that when our great playwrights realize that the tabloid drama can get a whole season's booking and make big money they will devote their time to it. The big comic opera stars will go into vaudeville, because they can earn more money with less work than in an opera. This is usually a winning combination with a universal appeal. I believe that the present bargain prices for vaudeville will cease, and that New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other big cities may have two-dollar vaudeville within the next ten years.

I have been asked many times if I thought the moving-picture show—the canned drama—would drive out or hurt the vaudeville business. It has helped rather than hurt. The moving-picture show has cut down the business of the "ten-twenty-thirty" melodrama house. It is developing into an adjunct of vaudeville, for many of the moving-picture managers are putting in vaudeville acts between films. We have organized a special department in the United Booking Offices to take care of this business.

The average man possibly does not stop to realize the hold that vaudeville has on the great mass of the people. The vaudeville theater is really the middle-class man's club. He can go there afternoon or night, smoke, walk about and meet his friends. It is an improvement on the saloon—so often called the working-man's club—and much better for his morals, his health and his pocketbook.

A few years ago the vaudeville manager thought that five or six thousand dollars was a good week's business. Today, some of the New York houses average from ten to twelve thousand dollars on the week. The legitimate playhouse considers itself lucky if it plays to five thousand people a week. Many big vaudeville houses average thirty-five thousand people a week, including matinées and the Sunday concerts. And the business is growing every day.