

[Vaudeville, chapter 1]

Theatrical Lore

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VAUDEVILLE

CHAPTER 1

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century there emerged from the beer gardens, honky-tonks, variety shows and music halls a distinctly American form of entertainment - Vaudeville. All the conglomerate of specialty and novelty acts from the minstrel "first parts" and "afterpieces", the "olio" or burlesque, and the feature specialties of the hippodrome and variety show combined in bringing to fruition this new lusty young giant of the amusement industry. For vaudeville, in the aggregate, was - everything.

To the American vaudeville stage came Emma Trentini and Schumann-Heink from the grand opera; Sarah Bernhardt, Bertha Kalish, Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Lillian Langtry from the drama; the acrobats, aerialists, wire walkers and trained animal acts from the circus; soloists and ensembles from the greatest musical organizations; silent fun-makers from the European pantomimes; banjo strummers and blackface comiques from the minstrel and medicine show; toss in the trick cyclists, quartettes, magicians, rope spinners and whip snappers, jugglers and equilibrists, dancers, monologists, ventriloquists, novelty musical acts, sister teams, lightning cartoonists, dialect comedians, piano teams, sketch

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artists, mimics and mummies of every brand; put them all together and mix well - this was vaudeville.

George Lederer is said to have been the first manager to apply the name "vaudeville" to a stage show. This was in New York in the eighteen-nineties. Prior to this it was simply a "variety show." And during the early days of vaudeville much of the stigma attached to the name "variety" - the smoky halls, beer gardens and honky-tonks - still clung to the newer appellation. Then B. F. Keith built a chain of palatial theatres designed especially to play vaudeville shows. And to lure a more fastidious clientele to the new temples of amusement he appended the title - Polite Vaudeville.

Then came such managers and impresarios as Tony Pastor, F. F. Proctor, Percy Williams, Mike Shea, Oscar Hammerstein, Harry Davis, and William Morris, who rained the prestige of vaudeville to ever greater heights. And the twenty-five year period of 1900-1925 may be designated as the gala days of vaudeville in America. After 1925 the decline was gradual until about 1929-30, when the combined onslaughts of radio, sound pictures and the depression affected the total collapse of this once glorious form of American entertainment. For American it was, in essence and character. As completely indigenous to the American soil as pork and beans, Coney Island hot dogs, Negroes strumming a banjo on a Mississippi levy, ham and eggs, the Cubs, and the Union Stock Yards. One must know the music halls of England, Australia, and South Africa; the variety performances at the Winter Garden in Berlin, and the Cirque Medrano in Paris; and the variedades of Latin America, to appreciate the distinctive character of American vaudeville in its prime days.

But that paradoxical name,- vaudeville- what could be more un-American? Whence came this alien name, and what was its origin? Historians do not agree, although it is undoubtedly of French derivation. Some contend that the name comes from a valley in Normandy, "The Val de Vire," but without offering enough proof to justify the contention. Another version, which the writer is inclined to accept, holds that the name was born on the banks of the river Seine many centuries ago. Its sire is supposed to have been

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one Fuller, who, like most men of the period, took his name from his occupation, 3 that of fulling cloth. His workers, each evening after toil, gave entertainments on the banks of the river, and became known as the entertainers of the “Vire Vire,” or “Virevaude,” or “Vaudevire.”

So much for the name, now for the show itself. The following program of nine acts, with a total running time of about two hours. I should designate as a typical American vaudeville show, representative of the 1910-1915 era. These were all recognized “standard acts” of the time. There is no question of relative merit, for a thousand contemporary acts would have suited our purpose quite as well, but I believe this program will serve as an apt example of a typical American vaudeville show.

The Four Bards American's Premier Acrobats.

Jack Wilson & Co Blackface Comedy Act.

Caesar Rivoli Lightning Change Artist.

Edmund Hayes & Co in “The Piano Movers.”

George Fuller Golden Monologist

Paul Cinquevalli Juggler

Six American Dancers Tapsters De Luxe

Rae Samuels “The Blue Streak of Vaudeville.”

Hassan Ben Ali Troupe Arabian Whirlwind Tumblers.

To the professional vaudevillian this was a “nine-act bill.” No performer, agent, or manager would refer to it as a “show” or “program”. A performer might ask of a colleague; “Who was on the bill with you last week in Kokomo?” Or - “There's a swell bill at the Palace this

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week.” The next to last position on a vaudeville program was always the favored “spot on the bill,” in which the high salaried stars were featured. And so the ambitious vaudeville 4 artists of lesser rank were continually “fighting for a better spot on the bill.”

There were but few along names to characterize the various types of acts. Most of them, with but few exceptions, were known professionally by the same names as appeared in their billing matter. The exceptions: A dancer was a “hooper,” a horizontal bar act was a “Stick act;” a tumbler was a “kinker,” and a contortionist was a “snake.”

A vaudeville performer whose act had achieved a great success, and who was the recipient of tumultuous and prolonged applause, might describe his success through the use of various typical phrases. The following are characteristic: “I knocked 'em dead.” “I stopped the show cold.” “I knocked 'em off the seats.” “I had 'em rolling in the aisles.” “I was a panic.” “I wowed 'em.”

However, when a performer walked off the stage at the conclusion of his act with little or no applause, it was said that he “died.” Or that his act was a “flop.” And, in describing the recalcitrant audience to a fellow performer back stage, he might remark: “They're sitting on their hands out there.” This was a very common expression. A “cold” audience which refused to applaud was invariably described as “sitting on their hands.”

Two commonly used American expressions which are definitely of vaudeville origin are “big time” and “small time.” In speaking of a large firm or company one business man today might remark to another: “That's a big time outfit.” The city editor, upon reading a news story, might comment: 5 “Say, this is big time stuff.” This phrase is in such common use today that it has become an accepted Americanism, and people use it freely without the least consciousness of its theatrical implications. Yet only a generation or two ago it was confined exclusively to performers, managers, agents, and others in the vaudeville profession. Vaudeville circuits were invariably referred to as “time.” Thus, instead of mentioning the “Pantages Circuit” a performer would remark: “I'm going to play the

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Pan time.” Or - “I just finished the Loew time,” or- “He's on the Orpheum time.” The two high class circuits in American vaudeville, -playing the greatest stars, paying the largest salaries, and having the finest theatres, - were the Keith Circuit (or Keith time) in the east, and the Orpheum Circuit (or Orpheum time) in the West. This was the “big time.”

These two circuits were also known as the “two-a-day,” because of their policy of presenting only two performances daily, - matinee and evening. All other circuits were “small time.”

Of the thousands of vaudeville acts available at all times, only a few (allegedly the best) could play the “big time,” There never was enough “big time” to employ all the first class acts. So the majority were forced to play the lesser circuits; such as the Loew, Pantages, Interstate, Proctor, Poli, Delmar, etc. It was generally considered unjust to classify an artist as a “small timer” just because he didn't happen to be on the Keith or Orpheum Circuits. And occasionally one might hear a performer argue that the better class circuits should be referred to as “medium time” to distinguish them from the cheap low-grade theatres in which inferior acts worked at a miserable salary, thus creating an intermediate category between the lowest and highest class of vaudeville. But the term “medium time” never came into general use 6 You either played the Keith and Orpheum Circuits, and were a “big timer,” or - you were a “small timer.” There was no recognized alternative.

In the event that your act lacked sufficient merit, or “entertainment value,” to qualify for the better class vaudeville theatres, then you simply had to play the “dumps.” This is not underworld jargon. “Dumps” was a word of common every-day usage in the old vaudeville days; it was used to indicate the smallest, cheapest, and most shabby theatres that used vaudeville acts. In speaking of a fellow performer a vaudevillian might remark: “Last I heard of him he was playing the dumps around Chicago.”