

Vaudeville and the Modern Entertainment Industry

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Abstract

How did Vaudeville influence the modern entertainment industry? Vaudeville was once the most popular form of mass entertainment in America. It was pioneered by Benjamin Franklin Keith in the late 1880's. He sought to create a family friendly environment to capitalize on a growing middle class, and made a great success of it. The impact of vaudeville was very significant and can be seen in the modern entertainment industry. Vaudeville was the first to apply the practices of big businesses to entertainment. This can be seen as the precursor to the entertainment conglomerates of today. Vaudeville also frequently used censorship so as to maintain the family atmosphere Keith depended on for his business. Modern entertainment routinely censors itself so as to appeal to a wider audience and bring in more revenue. The style of vaudeville also had an impact, as seen in variety shows obviously modeled after the same style. Vaudeville helped influence the modern entertainment industry to become the large successful enterprise it is today.

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Vaudeville and the Modern Entertainment Industry

Vaudeville, or the American Variety stage, was once the premiere form of popular entertainment in the United States. It was one of the first art forms that could be considered truly and uniquely American. Chains of theaters featuring shows of all kinds stretched across the country, and performers took to the road to showcase their acts. Families were intrigued by these eclectic series of performances. They would visit them in elegant theaters where smoking and swearing was banned by the management, for the benefit of the customers. Vaudeville was the first form of popular mass entertainment in the United States. Because of that, the purpose of this essay is to show how vaudeville influenced today's **modern** popular entertainment industry through an examination of the history of the theatrical form. It had obvious impact on the organization of theater, turning popular entertainment into a new form of big business. It also influenced the idea of morality in entertainment, and the idea of controlling content in order to appeal to certain audiences. It also influenced the overall style of media that was to come later, such as radio, television and the internet. Indeed, vaudeville's impact is large and far reaching. It did most definitely lead to the modern entertainment industry.

Vaudeville drew on several prior existing elements to establish itself. In the 1830's minstrel shows became very popular and toured all around the United States. These consisted of white performer dressing as African American slaves to sing, dance and act in a comical expression of stereotypes. Medicine shows traveled displaying performances to lure onlookers into buying assortments of tonics and salves. Those who wished for a raunchier and more "adult" performance could go see a burlesque show, featuring scantily clad women dancing and comedians filling in the space between performances. Needless to say, this form of entertainment did not find an audience with women, especially those looking to visit somewhere

with their children as a family. Vaudeville drew on all these types of theater, but legitimized and regulated them into a form capable of being appreciated by the growing middle class who hungered for clean family entertainment. It also took these small localized shows and expanded to make a nationwide network of amusement with entire continent spanning theater chains, turning these many small companies into a large successful business.

Vaudeville became popular largely do to the work a man considered to be the "father of vaudeville", Benjamin Franklin Keith (Easton). He sought to create a center for family entertainment appealing to women and children by selecting his acts appropriately, and was very successful. He put on clean entertainment, first in his Gaiety Museum, then later in his lavish Bijou Theater in New York in the 1880's (Easton). Keith was one of the first to recognize the astounding profit to be had by reaching this market. Word Morehouse describes this in his historical retrospective Matinee Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Our Theater as he writes, "He wanted women and children for his patrons, he was careful to avoid all vulgarity in his presentations, and he was soon calling his business "vaudeville" (Morehouse 162). Competitors running rival theaters agreed with this notion of family entertainment. Morehouse writes of Tony Pastor and F.F. Proctor, "both of whom were taking pride in bills designed for family trade, with the realization that when women and children were won over as patrons vaudeville would be on its way" (Morehouse 162). One note pasted in Keith's theaters read, "If you have not the ability to entertain Mr. Keith's audiences without risk of offending them, do the best you can" (Allen 246). Some actors would fight to keep such "obscenity" in their act, as that was probably their best material. However, the theater manager had the last word. Contracts would even restrict the actions of the actors outside the theater. One clause in a vaudeville contract stipulated that a performer mustn't pick up a girl within two blocks of the theater where they were booked

(Henderson 145). Keith and his rivals realized the valuable market provided by families with women and children looking for a suitable form of entertainment, and they sought to take advantage of it. The rise of this market can be seen in the form of other family style diversions, such as amusement parks (Easton). In Boston, the Catholic Church fully supported his brand of clean, family entertainment. The Church even went so far as to help fund the expansion of Keith's theaters, hoping to provide morally acceptable recreation for the people. (Easton) Vaudeville sought to present a clean show to the masses through regulation of the acts and their performers.

The types of moral regulation seen in the vaudeville era were carried into the modern entertainment of today. It still retains the same motivations: to appeal to families and to deter moral societal objections. The best know and most widely recognized example of this in the United States is the Motion Picture Association of America, or MPAA. Though, the organization performs many functions one of its most important duties is to apply content rating ratings and descriptors to motion pictures. They view every major motion picture and apply a rating they deem suitable, displaying for what audience the particular film is age appropriate. Parents rely on these ratings in determining what films to allow their children, or sometimes themselves, to view. Therefore, a movie with a rating of Parental Guidance (PG), which only suggests parents to consider the content, will have a much larger audience than one rated Restricted (R), which restricts all children under the age of seventeen. Thus, the movie studios have a great incentive to limit the amount of graphic material in their motion pictures, so as to reach a wider audience. This can be compared to Keith's limiting of profanity in his shows to appeal to families. Very similarly, movie studios place limits on the amount of graphic content in their movies in order to gain a wider audience. Television uses a similar rating system to describe its content. They also

aim to limit the amount of controversial material in their programs, so as to **not** alienate potential viewers. A popular example of this can be seen whenever a popular movie is broadcast on television. The broadcaster will remove many objectionable scenes and lines of dialogue so as to not offend their viewers. Even video games use the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) in order to content rate games. (As a side note, this organization owes its creation largely to the moral crusading work of figures such as Senator Joseph Lieberman in the early **1990's.**) AH these are methods of moral regulation are similar to those of vaudeville, in that they all seek to provide content that would be morally acceptable to families.

Censorship is also a controversy but common practice used today. Just as Keith would screen the content his performers used in their acts. Such screening can be compared to the Federal broadcast regulations enforced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC restricts indecent and obscene material from being broadcast over the radio and the television during certain hours of the day, when it is determined the most kids will be susceptible to its influence. In the movie industry, studios will edit out scenes in their movies in order to achieve a more desirable (lower) content rating, much to the chagrin of some directors and produces who claim that their creativity is being stifled. A recent controversy that has come up involves a new movie, produced by Penn Jillette entitled "The Aristocrats". It seeks to retell an old and very dirty joke that actually dates back to the age of vaudeville. The movie contained such obscenity that the producers decided to not even submit it for rating by the MPAA. This caused AMC Theaters, the nation's largest chain of movie theaters, to refuse to show the movie in any theater it owned. **The** cause of this is rooted less in grounds of moral corruption, and more on the grounds of profitable marketing. It would be hard to sell a movie to the public that was so vulgar it didn't even have a rating. Also, there is the public backlash to be considered.

Many groups claiming to stand for a more moral society would be in an uproar at any theater that showed this film, claiming it would corrupt America. Indeed, such controversial censoring extends even to the electronic medium. Most major retailers, such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy, will refuse to sell games rated Adults Only (AO) by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). This was recently demonstrated as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas was removed from store shelves after hidden content was discovered that forced its rating changed from Mature (M) to AO. The reason for this is the same; the stores don't want to be branded as "adult" merchandisers, but rather as safe for the whole family. All these examples relate back to the concept created by Keith in Vaudeville. These broadcasters, movie theaters and game sellers keep strict control over the product they distribute to the masses. Much like Vaudeville, they wish to maintain a family image to appeal to the widest possible market. It was vaudeville that first sought to capture this market, and that tradition can be seen the future dealers of entertainment to come.

Keith was very successful in marketing his new family oriented entertainment to the masses. In the 1880's, he opened the Bijou theater in " N e w York to display his variety performances. Soon, he had a chain of theaters featuring (wholesome) touring acts of all kinds to delight and amaze a willing public. However, as Vaudeville grew more popular, others saw how profitable this growing display would b e . Thus competitors sprung up, hoping to cash in. These included F.F. Proctor and Toy Pastor, a former performer in the P.T. Bamum Museum (Morehouse 162). By the 1890's theaters were spread all over the nation, booking acts of all kinds to satisfy their middle class family patrons (Easton). Keith was not content to merely compete with these new arrivals, nor was he going to outright beat them. In a move similar to those of Rockefeller and Carnegie, he sought to consolidate Vaudeville under his control. In

1905, Keith merged his theaters with those of F . F . Proctor, forming the United Booking Artists (Morehouse 164). He soon made other mergers and formed the Vaudeville Manager's Association, gaining a "virtual monopoly" of the vaudeville circuit (Easton). This large network of theaters would not only bring him tremendous revenue, but also grant control of the acts playing. He could send different performers to different areas, so as to best capitalize on certain tastes. Keith successfully vertically consolidated the vaudeville industry in order to ring it under his control, and also to bring in the extra revenue generated from owning some many theaters, it also granted Keith a large degree of control over the entire vaudeville industry. By owning almost all theaters, he controlled who would be popular and who would display their acts where. Vaudeville was the first form of entertainment to adapt this model of business method of organization. It turned entertainment into a large industry,

This type of consolidation and control can be seen often in the modern entertainment industry, and the motives are the same today as they were in the age of vaudeville. Those who produce entertainment are attempting to enlarge their consumer base and exercise a greater amount of control. This can be seen in such mergers as the Viacom purchase of Columbia Broadcasting Systems (CBS). This acquisition netted Viacom, not only a media giant, the popular national network, but also access to its vast catalogue of programming. It also gained control of many television and radio stations positioned about the country. It also gained control of Kingworld, a distributor of popular syndicated television shows such as "Wheel of Fortune" and "Jeopardy". It is obvious to see the amount of power this merger gave Viacom. Control of CBS allows them to bring in the advertising revenue of the popular network. The control of content can also be considered to the control that Keith was able to exert influence over the acts of vaudeville. This is also similar to the merger of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC)

and Vivendi Universal. The merger teamed another well established national television network with a media giant. This consolidation can even be seen across mediums. This occurred with the merger of America Online with Time Warner. AOL was the nation's largest internet service provider, while Time Warner was a media conglomerate owning a movie studio, several cable channels (including CNN) and the WB nationwide broadcast network. The deal promised to bridge the gap between traditional mass media and the relatively new content source of the internet. Though many analysts claim that this merger was not very successful, the motivations behind it were similar. Time Warner, already a kingpin in the standard media distribution industry, sought to expand its audience. Through the internet, they could hope to reach a new audience in new and clever ways not possible within their standard media. AOL gained an ally in a media giant and access to their years of successful and popular content. All these mergers, deals and acquisitions demonstrate a high level of organization making modern entertainment a true industry. Vaudeville was the first to treat entertainment like a big business. It was the first to have large scale acquisitions and mergers to expand and gain dominance in the industry. When looking at today's modern entertainment world, it is clear to see that its big business attitude was influenced by vaudeville.

The style of vaudeville can also be seen as having an inspiration for the exhibitions of today. Keith understood how to create a format that was broadly appealing so as to attain the largest audience. In pursuit of that goal, vaudeville theaters would book acts of all kinds in order to appeal to a wide audience. Some were performers from the legitimate theater that sought fame in a widely recognized format. Theaters would encourage them to come to lend a sense of credibility. There were also acrobats, singers, comedians and all matter of other acts hoping to hit it big and get top billing. Benjamin Franklin Keith even created a form of theater that could

cater to the working man, allowing him to be entertained at his leisure, whenever he wanted. Starting in Chicago, Keith made a vaudeville theater that ran a continuous show up to twelve hours a day. The idea was so that workers could come in whenever they could, at any kind of day, and still receive a good show in good company. Acts booked in such shows would perform two or three times a day to give them a greater amount of exposure. This idea was ingenious and brought him great success. It allowed his chain to grow bigger and be even more popular. Vaudeville could even be credited with helping the rise of motion pictures. In the early 1900's, some theaters would run short films before shows, as a sort of prelude to the entertainment to come (Leish 13). These unique stylings of vaudeville helped to influence the entertainments that were to come in the future.

There are many examples of the influence of vaudeville on modern entertainment. In the 1970's, variety shows became very popular television programs. Some featured famous icons of the times, such as Sonny and Cher. Others were hosted by famous comedienne's such as Carol Burnett and Flip Wilson. All these shows consisted mainly of a series of small unconnected **comedic** sketches, sometimes with recurring favorite characters. Music was often integrated into these programs as well, featuring popular singers and bands of the time. Saturday Night Live is especially known for having the most popular musicians perform on their weekly series. Guest stars from other famous programs or movies were also included to heighten the amusement and provide the audience with stars they could recognize. All these, especially the last aspect, are obviously taken from vaudeville. The style of the programs was very similar to that of the variety stage's, being that it would have several unconnected and diverse acts all performed together in the same show. The musical aspect was also important in vaudeville, just as it was a crucial element in shows like Sonny and Cher and Saturday Night Live. **The** inclusion of famous

actors also appears directly inspired. Vaudeville helped for the ideas behind these variety programs.

Vaudeville could even be considered inspiration for the twenty four hour entertainment radio and television networks of today. It was vaudeville that first made the idea of an all day show that people could see when they wanted. This can be compared to television and radio of today, which are always on and broadcasting programs (sometimes of poorer quality) to any viewer that wishes to tune in. This can be seen not only in entertainment, but also in the cable news **networks** such as CNN and Fox News Channel. These broadcast a constant live stream of information so that any person can turn them on and be sure they are receiving the most up to date global reports. Keith's vaudeville theaters were the first to attempt to deliver entertainment in a constant matter, and that is reflected in television and radio of today.

Vaudeville did not single handedly create what is known as the modern entertainment industry. Indeed, some events and innovations happened without its influence at all. The most important invention in modern entertainment, television, would have been created by Philo T. **Farnsworth**. without vaudeville's influence (Ritchie). Moral restrictions on entertainment would have no doubt appeared, based on cultural values at the time. However, there is no doubt of the inspiration of vaudeville. It was the first to recognize the viable "family" market, so it tailored its programming accordingly. It encouraged this to be the tradition and goal of future entertainment dealers, encouraging them to censor and limit what they displayed in order to attract this significant, and paying, audience. Vaudeville was also the first to treat entertainment as a big business, as Keith engaged in many deals to expand his range of theater and consolidate his competition. These types of deals occur frequently today, with deals valuing in the billions of dollars. Its style is also present in media, both in its variety and its continuous nature. It was

vaudeville that did all these things first and inspired the modern entertainment industry to achieve its vast size and status today. Just as Benjamin Franklin Keith was the father of vaudeville, vaudeville is the father of modern mass media.

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