

EXPLORING THE ARTISTIC DEPTHS OF VAUDEVILLE

E. F. Albee, the King of America's Favorite Entertainment, Tells "Musical America" of New Musical Era in Vaudeville—An Ultra-Exclusive and Highly Specialized Field—Why Many Artists Fail on the "Two-Performance-a-Day" Stage—European Names No Longer Awe Booking Managers—Singing and Playing Before "A Cross-Section of American Life"—The Listeners Unafraid—Bridging the Gulf Between the Concert Halls and the Modern "Variety Show"—Arthur Lawrason Offers Some Practical Suggestions

By ALFRED HUMAN

VAUDEVILLE is America's greatest pastime. Her votaries number millions; not even the motion pictures and Sunday newspaper "comic supplement" can boast of such a grasp on the American habit. To ignore this powerful force, to disdain to consider the artistic potentialities of what Samuel Johnson termed "a form of comic opera," would be the merest affectation. During the French Revolution an orator was rushing wildly through the streets. "Where are you rushing?" demanded a friend. "Following the crowd, following the crowd!" he cried, and he was off. He probably achieved his mission, he knew his people, he knew that aloofness meant defeat.

Let us take it for granted that our artist condescends to stoop; he will even "accept," in the jargon of musical artists, an engagement on the famous Keith circuit.

Picture the surprise of our friend when he fails to qualify for vaudeville.

He is an excellent musician, a pianist of more than usual gifts, but in his blind haste he failed to recognize certain considerations. After a preliminary "try-out" before a benighted audience in the despised Bronx, he is courteously given to understand that he was not destined for the Orpheum circuit. Our pianist is not only humiliated but pained; he had some idea of "bringing art to the people" and he has been checkmated by a dapper young manager, accredited interpreter of the will of his faithful constituents, who confessed freely, when pressed, that he could barely distinguish Debussy from Donizetti. But the manager guarded the portals and our chastened musician could go no further; not even his *Prix de Rome* badge would melt the guardian.

Now this illustration is not altogether fanciful. It is a fact that legions of worthy artists are barred from vaudeville every season, not because they are worthy but because they have a distorted perspective of this realm. Vaudeville is one of the most exclusive regions of entertainment; it is a lamentable fact to record but it is true that it is easier for a tyro to pass through the eye of opera.

For this reason we have attacked the vaudeville situation in this article from two angles. First from the viewpoint of E. F. Albee, the god or king of American vaudeville, as you prefer. It was Mr. Albee who lifted vaudeville out of the variety-stage depths and purified it—with opera in English. Some months ago we told this story in connection with Milton Aborn's narrative of early native opera, explaining how opera "rescued" vaudeville. Mr. Albee explains the new tendency and shows distinctly that the old era of performing elephants and gyrating fiddlers has happily passed, that the modern exploiters of entertainment will welcome serious artists. Then to go more into the practical side, we have questioned a specialist in this field who is prominent in the musical world. Arthur Lawrason's suggestions should prove invaluable to artists.

"Nothing Too Good"

Mr. Albee's statement follows:

"What are the facts about the relation of Keith vaudeville to the high class musical artist? My first statement must be that nothing is too good for vaudeville but that, as in every mode of expression, the medium must be strictly suited if one is to expect success. The prospects in vaudeville for musical artists of the first rank grow brighter every day. The great names appearing upon our programs evidence this fact. We are drawing heavily upon the grand opera, concert, and instrumental fields. Splendid permanent incomes are awaiting really fine artists who will study vaudeville audiences and give them what they want.

"I do not mean that legitimate musical artists must lower their standards, but I do want to make it plain that on the vaudeville stage music must be singable, that melody is of paramount importance. The beauty of the musical offering must be immediately apparent on the first hearing. It is best to present programs of the generally known and most popular type, such as the automatic pianos and the Victrola records have taken into the homes of the nation. Much of the best music of the masters has been so popularized. Vaudeville audiences like technical fireworks—coloratura especially, and high notes in song. They prefer the *fortissimi* passages on the piano, but on the violin like best the *pianissimi* parts and sustained notes.

"Keith vaudeville audiences want to hear the music that is played in Æolian and Carnegie Halls, provided it has true entertainment quality, and as they hear it they will learn to find entertainment in more and more of the finest pieces as they grow familiar with them. I think that I have made it plain to what extent concert musician artists need to modify or readjust their work for vaudeville.

"The musical taste of the general public is steadily rising, due to opera, player pianos, phonograph records, general musical education, and the many other influences that foster a fastidious tone sense. Vaudeville is bettering, too, in this regard, and I am sure that the day is near when we will book orchestras and symphony organizations of suitable proportions, artists in chamber music, and the greatest instrumentalists.

The Boston Symphony

"Already the Boston Symphony Orchestra has contributed the pick of its artists to vaudeville. For many summers an orchestra of some twenty members of the Boston Symphony has been organized to give concerts in Keith's Boston Theater before the regular vaudeville show. Every afternoon and evening in summer this condensed Boston Symphony has given concerts in the local Keith Theater, and, while at first only music fans came early for the entire concert, the general public soon discovered the beauty and inspiration of these recitals and the early audience grew until it reached capacity, and the vaudeville public learned to appreciate and love great music greatly performed. I am told that many of our patrons became subscribers to the concerts of the Boston Symphony in its winter season as a result of hearing the concerts at Keith's, which proved so splendidly educational in so much that is best in music.

"We have many experts studying the music field and our booking managers haunt the concert-rooms, opera houses and recital halls. The new tendency for better music is shown by the enlarged orchestras in Keith vaudeville theaters; by the condensed operas, tabloid operettas now before the public, and by the appearance in our houses of first-rank singers and musicians.

"Superb music accompanies the dancing stars who appear in our theaters, and our audiences appreciate it to the utmost. We have heard Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Scriabine, Moussorgsky, Grieg, Massenet, Delibes, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Verdi, Bizet, Schmitt, Ipolitoff-Ivanhoff, Glinka, Debussy, d'Indy, Ponchielli, Saint-Saëns, Meyerbeer, Halevy, Weber, Puccini, Rubinstein, Mendelssohn, and the other great composers, as we watched Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis, Theodore Kosloff, Lydia Lopokova, Vlasta Maslova, Adeline Genee, La Napierkowska, La Argentina, Albertina Rasch, Felyne Verbist, the Morgan Dancers and the Spanish Dancers. Certainly the luscious dance music of these supreme artists was enjoyed to the utmost.

Some Successful Artists

"Among the pianists who have registered success in vaudeville are David Sapirstein, Herman Wasserman, George Copeland, Arthur Friedheim, Tina

Lerner, G. Aldo Randegger, Wynne Pyle, Claire Forbes, Renee Florigny, Patricolo, Señor Wetony and Alexander MacFayden. They have been so popular on programs in all parts of the country and not one of these artists has complained that he or she was forced to lose dignity or lower standards.

"We have booked with success such violinists as Frederic Fradkin, concertmaster of the Boston Symphony; Albert Vertchamp, Manuel Quiroga, Ota Gygi, Vera Barstow and Jan Rubini. I recall also with pleasure Elsa Ruegger, Hans Kronold and Fritz Bruch, the 'cellists. In singing we of vaudeville have sent to grand opera Rosa Ponselle, Orville Harold and Dorothy Jardon.

"Grand opera has sent to us for successful tours Mme. Calvé, Marguerita Sylva, Henri Scott, Carl Jörn, Carolina White, Nina Morgana, Melissa Aldrich, Mme. Donald, Mme. Jomelli, Fritz Scheff, Albert Reiss, David Bispham, Ciccolini, Vernon Stiles and Mme. Chilson-Ohrman. We have also had the Paulist Choir. Yvette Guilbert was another serious artist who succeeded in vaudeville. I repeat, nothing is too good for vaudeville, and vaudeville has the income to pay for the best.

"Rosa Ponselle went to success in the Metropolitan Grand Opera direct from success in vaudeville, where she had been a Keith star. Would it have been possible for an artist to have achieved such a phenomenal rise overnight, as did Miss Ponselle, without the rich experience of vaudeville?

"Many other artists have stepped from vaudeville to success on the musical and legitimate stages. They left us equipped with the best possible training; they were at ease in any place or situation that the stage demanded; they had every confidence in themselves, and they went into their new field prepared to dominate their new audiences as they had dominated ours. Miss Ponselle's beautiful voice was fully appreciated in vaudeville, and it was with us that she gained confidence and, if I may call it so, daring. There is no experience on the stage comparable to that of vaudeville for giving an artist ease, precision and certitude. There is a familiarity between audiences and artists that teaches one to be at home anywhere.

"More and more the legitimate musical artist will turn to our audiences for a permanent, reliable and profitable patronage. There are many first-rate artists who have not yet a concert public who might be accumulating riches in vaudeville if they would come to us in a spirit of honest investigation and study just how far they could go with our audiences without making artistic sacrifices that would irk their consciences. Also there are many recognized musical artists who might be with us year after year receiving princely incomes if they would disabuse their minds of the fallacy that they are too good for vaudeville. We welcome all true art, provided it is human and immediately interesting.

"The field is enormous. Every city of importance has one or more prosperous vaudeville houses which can afford the highest salaries for artists. The Keith Circuit alone covers New York, Boston, Syracuse, Washington, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo, Dayton, Cincinnati, Louisville, Indianapolis, Portland, Lowell, Atlantic City, Jersey City, Pawtucket, Providence, and other cities.

"In New York City alone there are a dozen Keith theaters presenting bills of the highest class artists for metropolitan entertainment. Then there is Chicago and the great cities of the Middle West, the Coast and the Northwest. A successful feature for vaudeville may count upon two years of 'time,' as we call booking, and great excellence or a good new act insure repeat engagements on top of this."

Lawrason Divulges Some Secrets

Arthur Lawrason has as shrewd an insight into the inner workings of vaude-



Photo by Marceau

E. F. Albee, the Vaudeville King, Who Gives His Artistic Views to "Musical America"

ville as any musician in the country. Several years ago, sensing the importance of the great American diversion and its potential influence upon music, Mr. Lawrason stripped his mind of all prejudice, and concentrated his attention upon vaudeville fundamentals. He made many important "discoveries" in the matter of vaudeville technique, mass-psychology, business administration, with the result that to-day he is a specialist on the subject. In fact, he is now a practical director of artists who are qualified to seek glory in the "two-a-day" field, having associated with him as business associate H. W. Upton. Observe—we used the word "qualified." Mr. Lawrason's experience has made him scornful of the artist who speaks condescendingly of vaudeville as a refuge for the recital-platform failures.

"There is no room in vaudeville for such people," began Mr. Lawrason, "for they are completely ignorant of the situation. Let it be heralded far and wide that only artists of genuine gifts and possessed of a knowledge of certain essentials can ever hope to succeed in this extremely difficult and highly specialized field.

"First of all let us consider the vaudeville audience. The make-up is, it is true, more representative of all types than the average concert audience, but this does not imply that our vaudeville audience is not as thoroughly discriminating.

"The concert audience is self-conscious and critical and, supposedly, analytical in its consideration of the offerings. The vaudeville audience, a cross-section of typical American life, is less decorous, perhaps, but it is receptive, it is human, it is demonstrative to a Latin degree, it is particular, it is so frank, perhaps brutally so,—but so are European opera audiences.

The Direct Appeal

"Without going into any discussion as to the whyfords, the vaudeville audience is *personal*; the artist who fails to understand this intensely personal feeling must fail utterly. The vaudeville audience wants to hear about *itself*, its desires, its emotions, and the artist—let us assume she is a singer in this instance—must make the direct appeal by singing at her listeners and *concerning* them.

"If you will examine the successful popular song you will find in it this direct appeal. The slightest assumption of insincerity or affectation is fatal. Only recently a certain artist, prominent in the concert-field, failed ingloriously, because she had the notion that she must

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