

IMAGES  
*of America*

# NEW YORK CITY VAUDEVILLE



*Anthony Slide*



*Eddie Foy (1854–1928), seen here with his wife and the Seven Little Foys, became a Broadway star in 1901 thanks to his mimicry, pantomime clowning, and eccentric dancing. By 1908, he was touring vaudeville with his seven children, and made his Palace debut in February 1914. Bob Hope plays Eddie in the 1955 biopic *The Seven Little Foys*.*

*On the cover: John Robinson and His Military Elephants featured Tillie (with a claimed age of 108), who was reported to be “the only talking elephant in the world—20 tons of Animal Intelligence.” Aside from talking, the elephants also sang, danced, and play acted and became something of a fixture at the New York Hippodrome in the 1920s. (Courtesy of Anthony Slide.)*

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*Señor Wences (1899–1999) was the greatest of all comic ventriloquists. Born Moreno Wenceslao, he brightened the waning years of vaudeville, making his New York nightclub debut in 1936 and his vaudeville debut two years later at the Paramount Theatre. He arrived late at the Palace Theatre, in 1951, as a supporting act to Judy Garland. His act was incomparable and unique, usually featuring two characters: a doll created by painting a mouth with lipstick, adding two onyx rings for eyes and a tiny red wig to Wences' left hand and the head only of a Moorish-like man in a wooden box. Additionally Wences would juggle four plates on sticks while speaking in four different voices. Thankfully long after the demise of vaudeville, appearances on television with Ed Sullivan helped to*

*keep the ventriloquist's genius alive.*

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# INTRODUCTION

From the late 1800s through into the early 1930s, vaudeville was a unique American institution, the country's preeminent form of entertainment. It came into prominence before radio and the motion picture were invented, but was ultimately killed by a combination of the two. There was not a city in the United States that did not boast at least one vaudeville theater, usually a B. F. Keith, an Orpheum or, on the West Coast, a Pantages, but it was New York's Palace Theatre that was the ultimate home of vaudeville with a bill of fare on which all vaudevillians craved a place.

Vaudeville was the people's entertainment, a form of amusement that appealed to the poorest and the richest in American society. The vaudeville theater was visited weekly by a majority of Americans, eagerly seeking original entertainment and knowing that there was small chance of boredom. A typical vaudeville bill might include between 8 and 12 acts, ranging from the comedic to the acrobatic and from the vocal to the dumb. Some of the acts might be bad—and there were a lot of very bad vaudeville acts—but with most averaging 15 or 20 minutes, they could be tolerated by an audience that knew the next performer would be better.

The name “vaudeville” has its origins in 15th-century France, when a miller named Olivier Basselin, in the Valley of the Vire in Normandy, wrote a series of songs he called *Vaux-de-Vire*. They remained popular for 200 years, and the name became corrupted to *voix-de-ville*, or “sounds of the town.” From this came the French vaudeville, meaning a ballad or light form of comedy. The American vaudeville had its origins in the minstrel shows of the 1800s and in British Music Hall. While Americans selected vaudeville as the all-encompassing descriptive phrase is unclear, but vaudeville is was rather than music hall or the British term, variety.

Minstrel shows primarily originated in the South, with white Americans appearing in blackface and performing what were purported to be Negro songs and dances, such as “Jump Jim Crow,” introduced by Thomas D. Rice in the late 1820s. The first minstrel troupe to play New York was possibly the Virginia Minstrels, who were seen at the Bowery Amphitheater in February 1843. That same year, the Kentucky Minstrels appeared at the Vauxhall Gardens. Christy's Minstrels made their New York debut at Palmer's Opera House in October 1846, while Bryant's Minstrels were in residence at the Mechanics' Hall from 1847 through 1857.

One of the earliest venues offering what might be described as vaudeville entertainment in New York was the alfresco Niblo's Garden, located in lower Manhattan at the corner of Broadway and Prince Street. It was opened by William Niblo in July 1828 as the Sans Souci, and he renamed it Niblo's Garden and Theatre the following year. In 1866, the theater was home to *The Black Crook*, a dance extravaganza that introduced the chorus girl to the American stage.

In the 1860s, Tony Pastor (1832–1908) was the first to try and refine New York vaudeville, transforming it from a cheap form of entertainment relegated to the city's saloons into something that would be suitable for, and popular with, the entire family. In 1865, he opened Tony Pastor's Opera House (formerly the Bowery Museum), which remained in existence for 10 years, and at which Pastor



appeared at every performance. On October 4, 1875, Pastor took over the Metropolitan Theatre at 583 Broadway, and the following year, for the first time, he described the entertainment there as “vaudeville.” Pastor’s most popular vaudeville venue was his New Fourteenth Street Theatre, which he opened in the summer of 1881, and which became New York’s most successful theatrical establishment.

Tony Pastor paved the way for the major vaudeville entrepreneurs of the 20th century: B. F. Keith and E. F. Albee, F. F. Proctor, and Oscar and Willie Hammerstein. The B. F. Keith circuit (founded in Boston in the 1880s and taken over by E. F. Albee in 1918) had as many as 20 vaudeville houses in the city of New York. F. F. (Frederick Freeman) Proctor opened his first New York theater in 1886, and his most prominent, Proctor’s Pleasure Palace on 58th Street, in 1895. Oscar Hammerstein, the grandfather of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, was the man responsible for the Times Square theatrical district. His short-lived Koster and Bial’s Music Hall, on 34th Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, which opened in August 1893 and closed in July 1901, is best known not for its vaudeville acts but as the venue for the first presentation of the newly-invented motion picture by Thomas Alva Edison on April 23, 1896. Hammerstein’s Victoria Theatre of Varieties was taken over by his son Willie in 1904, and was noted for its many freak acts.

Beginning in 1885, theaters presented programs as “two-a-day” or “continuous vaudeville,” starting at 11:00 in the morning and continuing until 11:00 at night. The beginning of the end for vaudeville is generally linked to the closure of the Palace Theatre as a two-a-day vaudeville house in May 1932. Of course, vaudeville lingered on as an accompaniment to motion pictures in so-called presentation houses of the 1930s and 1940s. Many vaudevillians were called upon to entertain American troops during World War II, working through the USO, and early television revived vaudeville, thanks in large part to Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan.

E. F. Albee (1857–1930) was the most influential figure in 20th-century vaudeville, the head of what became the Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit; the creator of the medium’s company union, the National Vaudeville Artists, Inc.; and the man who ultimately destroyed vaudeville by selling its theaters in 1928 to Joseph P. Kennedy and RCA, at which point they became movie houses. RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) Radio Pictures was established, simultaneous with the talkie revolution. It was Albee also who summed up vaudeville’s appeal, when he wrote in 1923, “In vaudeville, ‘there is always something for everybody,’ just as in every state and city, in every county and town in our democratic country, there is opportunity for everybody, a chance for all.”

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# One

## ***THEY PLAYED THE PALACE***

Located at Broadway and 47th Street, the Palace Theatre served as both the flagship of vaudeville and of the B. F. Keith vaudeville circuit. To headline at the Palace was the ambition of every vaudevillian. The theater was built not by Keith but by Martin Beck, who leased the site for the theater on October 21, 1911. But by the time the Palace opened, on Easter Monday, March 24, 1913, Beck had become a minority owner, with 51 percent of the stock controlled by the B. F. Keith vaudeville interests, headed by E. F. Albee.

The theater cost a reported \$1 million to build. An average bill in its heyday cost \$12,000 in salaries, while the Palace made an average profit of \$500,000 per year.

The opening bill consisted of the Eight Palace Girls; caricaturist Hy Mayer; Ed Wynn; a one-act musical comedy titled *The Eternal Waltz*, featuring Cyril Chadwick and Mabel Berra; monologist Taylor Holmes; Milton Pollock and Company in a one-act playlet, *Speaking to a Father*, by George Ade; a wire walking act called “The Four Vannis”; Ota Gyli, billed as “Violinist of the Spanish Court”; and pantomimist and dancer La Napierkowska. The program was generally criticized, with the trade paper *Variety* particularly scathing as to the seating prices, which were as high as \$2.

It was not until May 1913 that the Palace began attracting a large-scale audience, and that was because the headliner was Sarah Bernhardt. By December 1914, *Variety* was describing the Palace as “the greatest vaudeville theatre in America, if not the world.” The last two-a-day vaudeville bill at the Palace was the week of May 7, 1932. Vaudeville and films were interchangeable for many years until October 16, 1951, when the Palace again became a vaudeville house, with Judy Garland topping the bill. In August 1957, the Palace reverted back to a movie theater, but reopened as a legitimate house on January 29, 1966, with *Sweet Charity*.



*The Palace Theatre is seen here in 1928, the year in which E. F. Albee lost control of the theater to Joseph Kennedy, and the year in which the names of headliners began to appear on the marquee. Fannie Brice was the first headliner, on October 29, 1928. By 1948, it was not the headliners but the film that received top billing on the marquee. Here it is Canadian Pacific starring Randolph Scott.*



*Seen here is a Palace Theatre program for the week of January 9, 1922, on which is featured the*

headliner Irene Castle. Irene Castle (1893–1969) appeared as a dance team with her husband Vernon in both revue and vaudeville. They first appeared together at the Palace in 1914. He died while serving with the Royal Flying Corps in 1918. This program marks Irene's return to vaudeville with a new dance partner, William Reardon. By 1932, the Palace's printed program had changed to magazine format. The headliner for the week of January 23 is Beatrice Lillie (1894–1989), the Canadian-born unladylike comedienne who had made her stage debut in England in 1913. She made her New York debut at the Palace in 1928 and was also a headliner there in 1929 and 1931. At the former engagement, Lillie shocked the Palace management by using the word "goddam" on stage.

RKO KEITH PALACE

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WEEK OF JANUARY 23rd

The Magazine of Vaudeville

Now Playing  
BEATRICE LILLIE





*Ed Wynn (1886–1966) has the distinction of being the best-remembered name on the opening bill at the Palace Theatre. His 14-minute spot, titled “The King’s Jester,” had him in the title role, trying to make the king (Frank Wunderlee) laugh. Known as “the Perfect Fool,” after a 1921 musical comedy with that name, Ed Wynn was a comedian with a bespectacled baby face, a silly giggle, and an effeminate walk. His jokes were often corny, but he was a star not only in vaudeville but also in musical comedy, on radio (from 1932 as *The Fire Chief*), on early television (with his own show from 1958 to 1959), and on screen (even winning an Academy Award nomination for his 1959 performance in *The Diary of Anne Frank*). His career began in 1901 and continued until his death.*



*Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was the individual most responsible for making the Palace a success when she appeared there at the end of her first U.S. vaudeville tour in May 1913. She was, of course, a major international legitimate stage star, but she toured in vaudeville in 1912–1913 and 1917–1918, drawing large audience despite performing only in French.*



*Ethel Barrymore (1879–1959) was another major legitimate stage actress who enjoyed an extensive career in vaudeville. She generally appeared in the one-act playlet, *The Twelve Pound Look*, by J. M. Barrie, and brought it to the Palace in 1921 and 1926. She always maintained that when she did not have anything worthwhile to do on the stage, she would return happily to vaudeville.*





*W. C. Fields (1879–1946) was a master juggler with a caustic wit and a mastery of the euphemism. He was in the words of critic Robert Benchley, “just about as grand as a comedian could possibly be.” Fields was also one of the few vaudevillians able to transfer virtually all of his vaudeville routines to film, including the crooked poker game, the pool table sketch, the juggling with cigar boxes routine, and others. Fields made his vaudeville debut in Atlantic City in 1896. By 1900, he was featuring juggling and billing himself as “the Eccentric Juggler.” By the time he made his Palace debut in May 1913, in support of Sarah Bernhardt, Fields had toured much of Europe, Australia, and South Africa. He made his first appearance in the Ziegfeld Follies in 1915 and was in a number of editions through 1925. He also found time for the 1927 edition of Earl Carroll’s Vanities and the 1923 musical comedy Poppy.*



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*Fritzi Scheff (1879–1954) was an opera singer who had first appeared at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1900. She made her vaudeville debut at the Palace in 1913, returning again in 1916. Her last Palace appearance was in 1930, when she sang the song most associated with her, “Kiss Me Again,” which she had introduced in 1905 in the operetta Mlle. Modiste.*



*Julius Tannen (1880–1965) was a comedy monologist, the then-equivalent of a stand-up comic. His Palace debut was in 1913, but on another occasion on stage at the theater, a black cat walked across the stage and settled at his feet. He looked down and commented, “This is a monologue, not a catalogue.”*



*Ethel Levy (1881–1955) is perhaps better remembered as the wife of George M. Cohan rather than as a singer with a great delivery. She was in vaudeville from the late 1890s through the 1920s, appearing at the Palace on many occasions from 1913 onwards.*



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*Joe Cook (1890–1959) was of the funniest, and the most forgotten, entertainers in vaudeville, noted for a routine featuring an imitation of four Hawaiians but which had Cook only impersonating two— for fear he would put out of business other performers who could only handle two Hawaiian imitations. He entered vaudeville as a teenager, and made his Palace debut in 1914.*



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*Irene Franklin (1876–1941) was both an impressionist and a comedienne, whose songs, such as “Be Your Age,” are laced with venom. She was a child actress on stage before touring Australia and America while still a teenager. She made her American vaudeville debut in 1895 and her Palace debut in 1915.*



*Lillian Russell (1861–1922) was one of the great stage beauties of her day, with a voice that was said to make grown men cry. Tony Pastor discovered her and changed her name from Helen Louise Leonard to Lillian Russell, starring her in 1881 in a burlesque of *The Pirates of Penzance*. She made her vaudeville debut in 1905 and the first of many Palace appearances in 1915.*



*Cecelia (Cissie) Loftus (1876–1943), whose billings as “the Queen of Mimics” and “That Incomparable Mimic,” are indicative of her act. Born in Scotland, she made her U.S. debut at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in 1895 and was popular in both New York and London. She did a sister act with Marie Dressler at the Palace in 1915, and after a long absence from vaudeville returned there in 1923.*



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