

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO VAUDEVILLE?

By JOHN BYRAM.

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pg. X2

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An Inquiry Into the Status of a Changing Institution, in Which May Be Found a Somewhat Hopeful Note

By JOHN BYRAM.

ALONG Broadway and the lesser highways and byways of the land the impression exists that vaudeville, both as an institution and as an amusement, is "through." On the other hand, the Palace, the only surviving straight vaudeville theatre in this metropolis and one of the five remaining in the country, has been compelled to put in an extra performance on Sundays to take care of the crowds and is enjoying a prosperity greater than it enjoyed even in the halcyon days of variety entertainments.

The argument may be voiced that since the Palace is a Broadway house, forced to meet the most exacting competition, what is taking place there is not symptomatic of conditions in vaudeville generally—vaudeville generally consisting of four or five acts presented in conjunction with a motion picture. Out in Pittsburgh there has been an attempt this season to bring back straight vaudeville, and the reports from that city have not been entirely discouraging. And the same competition faced by the Palace in New York—the elaborate movie houses with their stage revues (which also are vaudeville), the radio, the articulate films and the other popular-priced devices for amusing the masses—this competition is also to be found in the provinces, although to a lesser degree.

The passing of straight vaudeville and the relegation of variety acts to a position no higher than, if not inferior to, the complementary picture is the result both of outside economic pressure and inbreeding. Contributing to the former are a multiplicity of causes, most of which have already been aired. These cinema cathedrals dotting the country have, with their larger capacities, made it possible to put on a bigger show for a smaller admission than could big-time vaudeville, which was finally forced, in turn, to erect its own commodious Taj Mahals and compete with the film people in their field of stage revues and celluloid. That is one outstanding reason, a strictly economic one, for the decline of variety. Then there were the inroads made by other branches of the show business into vaudeville—an invasion which the variety people seemed at times disinclined to meet. This was due partly to economic reasons and partly to the inbreeding mentioned above.

For major vaudeville, which hereabout means Keith vaudeville, as it flowered for so many years, was almost a family institution. It was developed chiefly by B. F. Keith, by his son, A. Paul Keith, by E. F. Albee, who had been with the elder Keith from the beginning, and by a small group of their associates. These were all able and shrewd men of the theatre—as showmen, there are individuals in that group who are not likely to be equaled for years to come. But they who originated the vaudeville form of entertainment in this country and brought it from a beer garden adjunct to high respectability and prosperity naturally looked upon it as a doting parent looks upon a favorite child.

This hierarchy attempted to keep vaudeville, the institution, to itself, in so far as a healthy and expanding institution could be kept within the hands of a little group. So engrossed in their child were its several parents that a few of them lost their perspective. They could not see some of the faults of their pampered offspring. When it was menaced from without they were not in a position to help it defend itself; when tastes changed they were not ready to have it follow the crowd and adapt itself to altered conditions.

Thus vaudeville, despite its many admirable novelties and innovations, did not, in all respects, keep abreast of the times. The shows were laid out along the same rigid lines as when the Union Square house was new. A certain type of act was always the opener, another the deuce act, and so on. In the way the bills were run and staged it changed little over the years. Its type of production gradually became obsolete—painted olios, advertising drops, centre door fancies. The growth of the revue form of entertainment made demands upon vaudeville's talent, but it also showed a newer and modern way of mounting shows. The music hall overlords, however, were not greatly influenced by what was happening outside their business. They had all the necessary talent, they had developed some great stars, trade was good, and they were busy with their own internal problems. They were bent on giving the public comfort and luxury, and built palatial playhouses in various parts of the country, secure in the belief that vaudeville was the great American stage entertainment.

But the public is fickle, and he who serves it must be eager to anticipate its every whim and vagary. Other novelties came along; more theatres were built; circuits with a continuous policy of vaudeville and pictures began to pull more and more patrons away from the Keith houses.

A case in point is Philadelphia, now without a Keith representation. When the big-time house was built that city had only a handful of theatres. When it was transferred to the Shuberts recently to serve as a home of legitimate attractions, Philadelphia boasted several hundred theatres of all kinds. And until its dying day as variety headquarters, the Keith house was presenting programs staged and routined in virtu-

ally the same fashion as they were when it opened.

In fact, this vaudeville formula became almost a law among the bookers. It was believed that a departure from it would cause the heavens to drop, the walls of the N. V. A. to crumble. In time many of the straight vaudeville theatres were forced to take on films and cut down their stage shows, and to reduce their prices. And then the big time organization found that it was without the proper cinema connections. Circuits with no vaudeville pretensions at all were able to obtain the cream of the motion pictures and use acts merely as fillers, and that circumstance, strangely enough, did not seem to make them unpopular with the cash customers.

Put the Keith circuit in the East and Middle West and the Orpheum circuit in the Far West were so firmly entrenched and financially so powerful that the ravages of Mr. Loew's and similar enterprises did not perturb them. Klaw & Erlanger had tried straight vaudeville in opposition to them and failed, the Shuberts had done likewise.

It was, perhaps, a fool's paradise in which they lived, and not forever could they remain in it. Theatre building continued like mad; picture and presentation circuits sprang up all over the country until now the number of plush chairs to be filled daily is about three times the number of people who feel inclined to go to the show houses to occupy them.

Then came the period of amusement combines, of mushroom expansion, of intricate manoeuvres that Wall Street can best explain. There were moves and counter-moves. Keith united with Orpheum, affiliated with Pathé and De Mille, went into the downtown marts of finance, came under the direction of Joseph P. Kennedy, and finally joined with the Radio Company to form Radio-Keith-Orpheum. When the smoke had cleared, it was found that as a result of these manipulations E. F. Albee was still head of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Corporation, but that this was now part of a greater organization, the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Circuit, to the presidency of which a newcomer to the theatrical business, Hiram S. Brown, had been elected. This organization tied up pictures, vaudeville, radio, talking machines and a mechanical device for the recording of talking pictures into one unit.

Mr. Brown, 46 years old, decisive, and with an unusual record of success in various industrial fields—he left the leadership of the United States Leather Company for the RKO job—brings a fresh point of view to vaudeville and theatricals generally—not that of the booker, theatre owner or producer, but that of the man who sees shows through layman's eyes, essentially for enjoyment.

Ask him what he intends or hopes to do and he will tell you quickly that he doesn't know. He will add that any statements employing the

first person singular would be concocted on his part, as he has been in the business only two months and is still learning and studying the whole field of amusements. As to what will eventually happen to vaudeville, he says that one person's guess is probably as sound as another's. But his associates are of the opinion that in his brief tenure of office he has done much in reorganizing the booking and theatre management staffs and in perfecting the internal workings of the machine that supplies several hundred theatres which it owns or books with variety acts. These associates say that he has new ideas about the assembling of shows and the presentation of bills as entities.

It is this transfusion of outside blood into the life stream of variety which may bring back some of its vitality. Already the patient seems to be a little stronger, the color seems to be coming back to his cheeks. Not only at the Palace, but from other houses in New York and from other cities in the Keith-Orpheum circuit (incidentally several cities, Washington among them, where Keith-Orpheum vaudeville used to be strongly entrenched, are now without it) comes the word that both the quality of the shows and the quantity of the business are improving. There are still rumors abroad which indicate that the crisis is not entirely passed, one of them being that the Public people will next operate the former big time string of houses, a report which persists despite denials from RKO headquarters.

As popular priced entertainment, old-time vaudeville even had a definite esthetic place. It developed excellent low comedians and comediennes, great clowns, superb hoofers, and others gifted in making its audiences laugh or thrill. It did this unselfconsciously, with no thought that it might be adding to the Art of the world. In fact, only when it realized that there was such a thing as Art and that perhaps it ought to be encouraged, did vaudeville go to the bad, for then the custom was to run out and hire a dramatic actress or operatic singer and to make much of an alien celebrity. It is not for those who lent it their so-called artistic reputations that vaudeville will be remembered, but for its breezy, self-assured, talented own—its Joe Cooks, its "Herb" Williamases, its Nora Bayeses—who traveled year in and year out over the circuits, giving full value with every appearance.

And with its new affiliations Keith-Orpheum assuredly has a broader field than before both for the development of new talent and the proper projection of the old. What eventually results from conditions that are constantly changing may not be vaudeville as it was known in the heyday of the Colonial. It may be a vaudeville-like entertainment shown in conjunction with these conversational tintypes which are becoming more and more the rage. It may even be broadcast by television. But most certainly it will be up-to-date.



Those Comical Fellows, Shaw and Lee. They Are Currently Appearing in "Pleasure Bound," the Revue at the Majestic.