

B. F. Keith, The Vogue of Vaudeville, 1898

Born and raised on a New Hampshire farm, B. F. Keith began his show business career in the 1870s working in circuses. In 1883 he opened a dime museum in Boston and soon began presenting live variety acts in its 300-seat theater. With his partner Edward F. Albee, Keith leased several regular theaters in the Northeast, presenting low-priced, completely respectable "vaudeville" shows that ran continuously from morning to night. In the early twentieth century the Keith-Albee Circuit came to dominate big-time vaudeville. In 1898, with his empire still growing, Keith tried to explain the broad appeal of vaudeville theater, as well as his own business success.

SOURCE: B. F. Keith, "The Vogue of Vaudeville," *National Magazine* 9 (November 1898), 146-153.

I do not think that the old saw, "Necessity is the mother of invention," ever had a clearer application than in the case of my origination of the continuous performance idea of entertainment. Replying to the query of a friend, not long since, "What first induced you to establish the continuous performance?" I truthfully replied: "Because I had to do something."

A mental retrospection of the years prior to this particular period of "having to do something" discloses the fact that shadowy gleamings of the success that would follow the institution of the new form of amusement were constantly flitting across my mental vision, with the result that I pondered over the problem betwixt waking and sleeping many a restless night.

All at once the full formed idea was made plain, and I never hesitated in putting it into execution. It was clear that the majority of people would stay through an entertainment so long as they could, even sitting out acts that had to be repeated. The old form necessitated a final curtain at a specified time, and the emptying of the house. As a result the succeeding audience gathered slowly, the theatre was necessarily dreary as they came into it, and there was nothing going on. Did you ever notice the hesitancy on the part of early comers to a playhouse to assume their seats in the auditorium, how they hang back until reassured by numbers? Well, that is one of the things the continuous performance does away with. It matters not at what hour of the day or evening you visit, the theatre is always occupied by more or less people, the show is in full swing, everything is bright, cheerful and inviting. In this connection, I remember that in the days of my first shows (prior to the opening of the Bijou), I was always maneuvering to keep patrons moving up and down stairs in view of passersby on the sidewalk for the specific purpose of impressing them with the idea that business was immense.

Beyond making the start in the continuous, I gave little thought to the growth of the business. I was convinced that would come in due course, as amusement seekers became familiar with the new order of things, but I never dreamed of its expanding to its present proportions, nor that it would become such a popular form of entertainment that imitators would spring up all over the country, as they have today.

For the benefit of those who have never enjoyed a vaudeville show of the continuous order, I might explain that it is designed to run twelve hours, during which period performers appear two or three times, as it would be manifestly impossible to secure enough different acts to fill out the dozen hours. The best class of artists

appear twice, just as at a matinee and evening performance in a dramatic theatre, and the balance do three "turns." It was this revolution of "turns" that I found most difficult to explain to my employees at the outset. One, who has since risen to a position of trust and prominence in my business, was then lecturing on "The Arctic Moon," a relic of the Greeley expedition which was presented to me by Lieutenant Brainerd. When it came to his turn to go on again, he came to me and said: "Why, Mr. Keith, I can't go out there and make that talk over again; the same people I talked to before are still in the house. If you say so, however, I'll do it." I did say so, as that was my plan, and he went on and began his lecture, and people all over the house got up and left, but their places were soon taken by others, and the continuous performance had its beginning. The gentleman who lectured soon saw the point.

I have to smile now whenever I think of the manner in which my project was received at the outset. I shall never forget the look of sincere pity which overspread the countenance of my chief assistant, to whom I unfolded my plans. He did not say a word, simply gave me a look that said as plainly as words could have done that he regarded my scheme as visionary beyond discussion. But then, that was the opinion of people generally, especially managers of other amusement enterprises, not a few of whom predicted my failure within a short period.

Two things I determined at the outset should prevail in the new scheme. One was that my fixed policy of cleanliness and order should be continued, and the other that the stage show must be free from vulgarisms and coarseness of any kind, so that the house and entertainment would directly appeal to the support of ladies and children—in fact that my playhouse must be as "home-like" an amusement resort as it was possible to make it. While a certain proportion of the male sex may favor stage performances of a risqué order, none of them would care to bring the female members of their families, to witness an entertainment of that description, and I think that a majority of men who do visit playhouses where that sort of entertainment is provided have a feeling of shame when they get outside and the glamor is removed. In the early days of my business career, many worthy but mistaken people ridiculed the idea of a clean and respectable house and entertainment being conducted at the then price of admission (only ten cents), but I successfully demonstrated that such a thing was possible. Indeed, I believed then, as now, that one can be just as respectable and clean—always provided they have the desire so to be—in a resort where ten cents defrays the admission, as in one where ten dollars is the charge.

Nowadays, the public has grown very discriminating, and not only do they demand a better quality of acts, but they expect to see the smallest sketch presented with proper stage settings and surroundings, something that was unheard of in the earlier days of vaudeville. Formerly, while any meritorious act was sure of recognition, a decided preference was exhibited for short farces and afterpieces. It was for this reason that for several years after I inaugurated continuous performance, I kept a small stock company, who presented short plays each week, which were always cordially received. One of the most pronounced successes was achieved with a condensed version of "Muldoon's Picnic." It was staged nicely, had a good cast and ran for nearly two months. Another unexpected hit was made with a small panorama illustrating John Brown's famous raid at Harpers Ferry, together with other exciting incidents in the life of the great abolitionist. In connection with this attraction, a half hour descriptive lecture was given, and orig-

inally produced on a Monday morning to fill an unlooked-for vacancy. It made such a distinct hit that it was continued for several weeks.

There has been a marked improvement in vaudeville acts in the past few years, as is evidenced by the fact that many of the older performers, who were at the head of the programs in those days, and who persist in following the methods by which they then attained popularity, have been relegated to second and third places, and even then fail to make any marked impression on the amusement-seeking public.

The advent of dramatic players into my theatres has been distinctly beneficial, in that it has added the element of novelty, which is the essence of vaudeville, and has attracted the attention of a desirable class of patrons whose previous knowledge of a variety entertainment had been very vague and largely governed by tradition. As to the sort of entertainment which seems to please most, light, frothy acts, with no particular plot, but abounding in songs, dances, bright dialogue and clean repartee, seem to appeal most to the vaudeville audiences of the present time. But, it is quite evident that a thoroughly good program, in its entirety, is what draws the public, rather than individual acts, the rule being proven, however, by occasional exceptions, notably the Living Picture production, the song-sheet novelty and the Biograph, the most improved of the motion-picture inventions, and a very few of the leading performers who have novelties to offer. The most marked improvement is the tendency of artists to keep their acts clean and free from coarseness, and to do away with the ridiculous costumes which were formerly a glaring defect of nearly all vaudeville entertainments. Added to this is the closer attention paid to stage setting and scenic embellishment generally.

The character of the vaudeville audience has notably improved in recent years, and the entertainment of today is freely patronized and enjoyed by the most intelligent and cultivated people, who flatter me by the assurance which their presence in my theatres brings that they have confidence in my pledge that therein nothing shall be given which could not with perfect safety be introduced to their homes.

There is (or was) a mistaken impression on the part of some eminent critics, and others, that my scheme of vaudeville simply served the turn of people who desired quantity at the expense of quality, and I remember reading a story, while abroad, in which the Astor tramp yarn was made to do duty as illustrative of this point. For the benefit of those who may never have seen it—or seeing, have forgotten—I will rehearse it as memory serves. The tramp, who, after being arrested for sleeping in the millionaire's bed burglariously, was asked by a reporter what sort of a dinner he would order if he possessed all the wealth of John Jacob Astor. The hobo reflected long and earnestly, and finally replied: "I think," said he, thoughtfully, "if I had all that 'ere Mr. Astor's millions, and I had the choice of a real good dinner, I would order corn beef and cabbage. It's so werry fillin'."

Now, as a matter of fact, there are no audiences anywhere who demand so much that is good in an entertainment as the patrons of the continuous form of amusement. Personally, I care as much for grand opera as I do for a variety show, and I have no doubt but that a large percentage of the patrons of my houses do also. This was demonstrated during a six years' continuous run of opera in my theatres. If quantity and not quality were desired on the part of vaudeville audiences, many thousands of dollars could be saved in a year by the non-employment of high-priced artists

from the dramatic stage, the operatic stage and the lyceum platform.

The indications are that vaudeville will be the popular form of entertainment for years to come, and, through the acquisition of new and better material there will be evolved a higher vaudeville, constantly improving in quality, and adapted to the changing conditions of the times.