

THE KEITH-ALBEE COLLECTION

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For students of American theater, vaudeville, and cinema, the Keith/Albee Collection offers an unparalleled inside view of the day-to-day operation of vaudeville and motion picture theaters in the early part of this century, including everything from specific vaudeville acts and booking practices to nickelodeon programming, finances, and illustrated song use. Consulted by Robert Allen for his classic dissertation on *Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (University of Iowa, 1977), by Alison Kibler for her innovative book on *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and more recently by researchers including Paul Spehr and Richard Abel, the Keith/Albee Collection has nevertheless been by and large overlooked by silent film scholars.

Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee became partners during the 1880s to promote “high-class” vaudeville. After establishing a theater in Boston, they turned to Providence, Rhode Island, where they operated a series of theaters of all types, from opera house to nickelodeon and from vaudeville to picture palace. During the final years of the nineteenth century, they created the nation’s premier circuit of vaudeville theaters, stretching from Maine to Ohio. In 1906, they established the United Booking Office, a powerful organization that sought to monopolize U.S. booking of vaudeville acts. During the 1920s the Keith/Albee circuit of theaters merged with a western chain to form the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit, which was sold in 1928 to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), thereby establishing Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), a major force in Hollywood filmmaking throughout the studio years.

The papers in the first three series of this collection concentrate on the Keith/Albee theaters in Providence and several nearby Rhode Island towns, from B. F. Keith’s Opera House in 1894 to the RKO Albee in 1941, with a heavy concentration on materials from the silent film period. Six feet of subject files housed in eleven boxes and a map case include such unusual items as salary sheets, booking lists for vaudeville acts, and weekly cash books for several silent and sound theaters. The level of detail is often exhilarating. Box 10, for example, reveals the specifics of the Pawtucket, RI, Star Theatre’s finances right down to the number of pennies spent to feed the local cat.

The heart of the collection, however, is the fourth series, 150 oversize (9 inches x 15 inches, often four or more inches thick) record books offering a level of detail available nowhere else. Volumes 1-24 contain weekly reports covering the period 1902-1923 from the managers of vaudeville theaters around the Keith/Albee circuit. The reports from Boston, Providence, New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit are virtually continuous, while several other cities are represented only partially.

Each report (averaging two pages) details the manager's evaluation of the week's program. We learn not only who performed, but in what order, how many times a day, for how many minutes, using what portion of the stage, and what the manager thought of the act. Better than any other collection, these managers' reports make it possible to trace when films were programmed in vaudeville theaters, where they were located in the program, which exact films were shown, and how they were received. We discover which films were held over, which ones were brought back, and from time to time we even find out which portions of a film were cut by the manager, and why. For every week of the period covered an average of eight to ten reports provide precious information.

Volumes 25-137 are clipping books covering the period 1894-1941. From legitimate theater and vaudeville to nickelodeons, picture palaces, and neighborhood sound film theaters, these well-kept oversized books offer programs, other in-house materials, and clippings from the local press (including French- and German-language newspapers). Researchers on early film theaters will be especially interested in volumes 118-121 on the Providence Nickel Theatre and Bijou Theatre (1906-1916), volumes 122-126 on the Pawtucket, RI, Keith's Theatre and Scenic Music Hall (1903-1924), and volumes 128-130 on the Pawtucket Bijou Theatre and Star Theatre (1909-1923). Students of silent feature exhibition will pay special attention to volumes 56-70 on the Providence Victory Theatre (1919-1932), volumes 71-76 on the Woonsocket, RI, Bijou Theatre (1913-1926), and volumes 77-95 on the Providence E.F. Albee Theatre (1919-1929). Sound film researchers will want to consult volumes 96-109 on the Providence RKO Albee (1929-1941).

Volumes 138-150 contain miscellaneous materials, including two volumes of cast lists, a volume of caricatures, five volumes describing new acts, and several cash books from the 1918-1921 period.

The scrapbooks are not indexed in any way, so in general it is possible to trace specific performers or titles only if relatively precise possible dates of performance are known from other sources or if a researcher is able to spend many hours, potentially, in the search. Graduate students in the School of Library and Information Science can often be hired to do this work at a researcher's direction and expense. The Special Collections Department, located on the third floor of the University of Iowa Library, can help in locating student workers. The Department is open from 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday to Friday, except on national and some University holidays; scholars visiting from a distance are urged to check service hours on the Department website (<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll>) or to communicate prior to their visit, preferably using the e-mail address listed above.

The Department generally does not have staff resources to search the record books or to make large numbers of photocopies for readers. A limited number of photocopies can be made from some of the volumes in this collection, others are too fragile to permit copying. The web address listed above provides a complete inventory of the entire Keith/Albee Collection.

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