

VAUDEVILLE

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Theater E.4.4 – Create publicity for a dramatic presentation

Theater E.4.6 – Rehearse and perform a scene or play for peers and invited guests.

Social Studies B.4.1 – Identify and examine various sources of information that are used for constructing an understanding of the past, such as artifacts, documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, paintings, architecture, oral presentations, graphs, and charts.

Social Studies B.4.7 – Identify and describe important events and famous people in Wisconsin and United States History.

While playing at the Palmgarden Beer Hall in St. Paul, Minnesota, Houdini and his wife were discovered by a man named Martin Beck. Mr. Beck was the owner of several Vaudeville theaters. Vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment in the mid 1800s through the 1920s. Vaudeville shows were aimed at a family audience. Although it seems really strange to us today, dime museums and some other theaters allowed customers to smoke and drink during the show. Vaudeville theaters did not permit such behavior. They tried to be respectable. They also did not allow the use of vulgarity – swearing, or distasteful material, in the performers’ acts. Like dime museums, vaudeville shows were made up of a variety of acts (kind of like a talent show). In fact, a normal vaudeville show included eight to ten acts and lasted for three hours! The 10-30 minute acts might include singers, dancers, comedians, female impersonators, strong men, actors, musicians, and magicians.

Teachers may wish to check out some vaudeville acts online. You may choose which, if any, to share with your class. Please be sure to preview the video and sound clips before your class sees or hears them. Some vaudevillians used racial and ethnic “jokes” in their routines and you will want to determine which acts are appropriate for your class. Two sites to check out are:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/easton/vaudeville/vaudeville.html> – put together by Rick Easton of the University of Virginia History Department – and <http://bestwebs.com/vaudeville/> -- put together by a company that sells vintage recordings.

Help your students to organize a talent show for another classroom or for the rest of the school to demonstrate the nature of a vaudeville variety show. Students who feel comfortable can demonstrate a variety of talents – singing (or lip-syncing), dancing, comedy, doing impressions, playing an instrument, etc. Have students examine the vaudeville playbill (see second file online) provided and use it as an example to individually create playbills for their own talent show.

- 1) Collect the names of students participating in the talent show. Ask them to share with the class what their talent will be. As a class, come up with slogans for the performers as shown above (e.g. “Masters of the Xylophone” or “The Smartest Simians . . . Not ‘Among the Best’ but Actually ‘The Very Best’.”)
- 2) After coming up with these slogans together, have each student use them to create a playbill for their variety show. On our playbill, Houdini appears as the “headliner,” meaning he got “top billing” (his name was the biggest on the playbill.) Students can use the name of their own act as the headliner or choose to headline a classmate’s act if they are not entered in the talent show.
- 3) Students should observe the same rules as were observed in vaudeville theaters – performers should make sure that their acts are in “good taste” – in other words, student comedians should not make jokes about their classmates, and songs should not include any swearing, etc. The time for each act should be limited by the teacher (in vaudeville acts lasted 10-30 minutes). The teacher may want to limit performances to 5 minutes or so.