

Slowik, Michael, University of Iowa. “Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn From Keith-Albee Managers’ Reports”

This paper focuses on the role played by vaudeville houses in early film exhibition by examining a neglected archival resource: Keith-Albee managers’ reports, which are housed in Special Collections at the University of Iowa. From 1902 to 1923, the Keith-Albee circuit—the most powerful and popular chain of vaudeville theatres in the United States—collected weekly written reports from the circuit’s theatre managers that provided detailed weekly commentary on each act on the bill, including live acts and film programs. As I shall demonstrate, the Keith-Albee reports shed new light on several important areas of silent film history. The reports reveal the importance of balancing individual programs of films during the early years of cinema, an aspect of film exhibition often neglected by historians. Rick Altman has argued that to accompany the full program in the 1920s—which generally included a newsreel, scenic, comedy, and occasionally a prologue as well as the feature film—the wide array of nickelodeon sound practices in the late aughts and early teens got shunted into different parts of the full program. However, the reports suggest that to trace the lineage of the 1920s full program, we must also direct our attention to film exhibition in vaudeville. Both before and during the nickelodeon era, vaudeville utilized a strategy of program variety that would carry over to the “evening’s entertainment” in the 1920s movie house. Finally, the reports demonstrate that the vaudeville house, as a venue of mass entertainment, served as an early testing ground for film’s ability to appeal to a mass audience. Only by including an analysis of the program content and strategies of vaudeville—as evidenced by the Keith-Albee managers’ reports—can scholars sufficiently trace how Hollywood came to utilize the full program to forge a mass audience for its product.

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