

Side Show

Book and lyrics by Bill Russell

Music by Henry Krieger

Directed by Joanne Gordon

Audience Guide

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Principal Character Breakdown

Daisy and Violet Hilton: Conjoined twins who are featured in the sideshow, and later become vaudeville performers.

The Boss: He runs the Side Show.

Buddy Foster: An aspiring dancer/musician who brings Terry Connor to the Side Show to meet the twins.

Terry Connor: A talent scout for the Orpheum Circuit.

Jake: A performer with the Side Show.

Additionally, a large ensemble cast fills out the show, portraying other characters throughout the show such as the Bearded Lady, Reptile Man, Snake Lady, Harem Girls, Roustabouts, Reporters, Vaudevillians, the Follies Company, Party Guests, Radio Show Singers and Hawkers.

Synopsis

From the Original Broadway Cast Recording

<http://www.theatre-musical.com/sideshow/synopsis.html>

The Boss introduces the exhibits in his sideshow, including his star attraction, the Siamese twins ("Come Look at the Freaks").

Buddy Foster, an aspiring musician, brings Terry Connor, a talent scout for the Orpheum Circuit, to see the Siamese twins. Buddy thinks he could help them create an act and convinces Terry to meet them. The two men interrupt a party for the girls.

Terry asks their names and they respond, "I'm Daisy", "I'm Violet". He then asks them their dreams ("Like Everyone Else"), and wants to help them come true ("You Deserve a Better Life"). After the Boss rudely refuses Terry's offer to be cut in on the twins' potential vaudeville career ("Crazy, Deaf and Blind"), Terry devises a scheme whereby Buddy will teach the girls a song. Jake, an African-American who plays the Cannibal King in the sideshow and is the twins' friend and protector, begs them to consider what they're getting into and the whole sideshow family adds its opinion ("The Devil You Know").

Two weeks later, Terry refuses to see the twins perform and Buddy tells him how the personal dynamics with the girls are getting sticky ("More Than We Bargained For"). Before their secret late-night performance, the twins confess to each other how infatuated they are with the two men

who've come into their lives ("Feelings You've Got to Hide").

The Hilton Sisters' secret debut is a great success ("When I'm By Your Side"). But the Boss discovers the subterfuge and physically threatens the twins when they tell him they're leaving the sideshow. Jake comes to their rescue and the other attractions threaten to leave also, causing the Boss to back down. Daisy, Violet and Jake, whom Terry has invited to help backstage on the twins' tour, bid farewell to their sideshow family ("Say Goodbye to the Freak Show").

It's time for the twins' first public performance, and Terry invites a group of reporters together before the show ("Overnight Sensation"). Before their vaudeville debut, the twins argue about their different ways of expressing interest in men ("Leave Me Alone"). Onstage they sing "We Share Everything" in a production number featuring them as queens of ancient Egypt.

After the twins' performing triumph, Terry and Buddy shower them with kisses. Hostile reporters ask tough questions about the girls' love life ("The Interview"). Terry and Buddy deny any romantic inclinations, leaving the twins to wonder if they will ever find romantic fulfillment ("Who Will Love Me as I Am?").

Act II opens with the Hilton Sisters at the height of their success - a Follies-style production number ("Rare Songbirds on Display"). Daisy's dream of stardom has come true but Violet seems no closer to her dream of finding a husband.

At a fancy New Year's Eve party, Buddy tries to cheer up Violet and ends up proposing marriage ("New Year's Day"). Afterwards, Terry imagines what it would be like to be alone with Daisy ("Private Conversation").

In an onstage number ("One Plus One Equals Three"), Buddy, Violet and Daisy issue an upbeat invitation to their wedding. But backstage both Daisy and Buddy separately express doubts as to how the arrangement will work. Jake overhears Buddy and, in an effort to save Violet from seemingly imminent heartbreak, confesses that he has loved her for years ("You Should Be Loved").

The night before Violet and Buddy's wedding as the grand finale of the Texas Centennial, Daisy is feeling left out. To appease her, Terry suggests going where they could be more-or-less alone together ("Tunnel of Love").

The big day arrives. Hawkers sell tickets and souvenirs ("Beautiful Day for a Wedding"). But in the dressing area, complications arise. Jake announces he is leaving. Buddy confesses he's not strong enough to marry Violet. Daisy offers a solution which will ensure a movie contract dependent on the wedding publicity ("Marry Me, Terry"). Terry cannot bring himself to publicly acknowledge what he feels for Daisy. She dismisses him and insists that Violet and Buddy go through with the ceremony, which will at least benefit everyone's career. Left alone, the twins find solace in each other ("I Will Never Leave You"). As the wedding proceeds, they reprise "Come Look at the Freaks" with full understanding and acceptance of who they are and what they are doing.

Interview with Joanne Gordon

By Tiffany Moon

TM: Why this play, why now?

JG: Once again we are in a Depression. Once again there is a hunger for people to categorize people as something less than they are in order to make themselves feel better. Quite frankly, I find one of the most intriguing phenomena of the current political American climate is that so many people in a blue collar environment are voting for interests against their own, where they condemn assistance in the health care system, for example. It's bewildering to me. I think a lot of it is, at its base, racist, which coming from South Africa is very scary. So there are two notions. There is this whole notion that when economic stress occurs we need to feel better about ourselves by marginalizing somebody else, which is precisely what happens in this play. The opening, which is very Brechtian, "Come Look at the Freaks," the very real question is, "Who is the Freak?": the audience, us, or the people in the Side Show. That's the first thing. The second thing is that I, despite every attempt to quash it out of me, am an unrequited romantic. I think that one of the things that makes the play for me so infinitely sad is that these two girls, and the play is based on a true story, long for that same naïve American dream that we all do. That "happily ever after" kiss and getting married and falling hopelessly in love and having two-and-a-half kids and a dog. The fact is, they long for it and are absolutely unable to achieve it because people cannot get over their "problem." People are not accepting, and are not able to adjust. One of the things that is so fascinating again, in terms of the contemporary context – there was an article in the NY Times today. There's an HBO special tracing this mixed-race marriage where the couple were thrown out of Virginia in the 50s, three years before Barack Obama was born - so it's not long ago - because he was white and she was of mixed race. It follows their fight to be able to go home, which went on for years and years until the 60s. So this whole notion of who can marry who, and what's acceptable in terms of marriage, and obviously the comparison for today is what's going on with whether gay marriage is acceptable. It's this whole notion of how we all at heart long for that almost conventional, cliché "happily ever after" falling in love, and some people by the very nature of their existence are precluded from having it. I find that infinitely sad. Not that they can't have it, but that they long for it so much. The play as originally performed and written ended with this phony marriage, where you have this sense that it's not going to last. I'm hoping with the final images of the play, which I won't tell you about, we suggest the loneliness of their death. The actual twins were living alone, fairly poverty stricken in Texas, and the one died and the other must have survived about six days, and they found their bodies on top of a radiator trying to stay warm. Pretty grim.

TM: Can you talk about the imagery that you're inspired by?

JG: The big thing is the period – we started with the Dust Bowl, the very famous Bourke-White photographs, and the poverty and the hunger in those faces. Then going into the Midway Side Shows, and looking at that garish distortion of the freaks in the paintings that were done on the canvas to advertise the Freak Shows. We're really focused on the idea of looking at, of

displaying, and we ended up in the wonderful unit set that is really an exaggerated set of bleachers, looking down in a circus tent.

TM: How are you dealing with the problem of creating Siamese Twins in this piece?

JG: Theatrical. It's totally theatrical; we don't expect it to be believable. In fact, because these twins were in an actual film, this 1930s film by Tod Browning called *Freaks*, they were really only attached at the hip. What we've realized is the more we stylize, the more real it will look.

TM: As far as the other "Freaks" go, how theatrical are they?

JG: We're not going graphic. I want the transformation to happen in front of the audience, and really the point about these freak shows is most of it was phony; it was just there to tantalize and turn people on. The lady will put on her beard, and the snake charmer will take up her snake, and the virgins that will remain constantly virgins will not be very virginal.

TM: You said the beginning of the play is inspired by Brecht. Is that an inspiration for the entire production?

JG: No, because I always think that Brechtian theory only works when it doesn't work; that is, I don't want an alienation of an audience, I want an identification. It starts with that accusation and moves away from Brechtian confrontation right away, so that in the final moments of the play, which look in many ways very similar physically, I want the impact to be exactly the opposite. That we're not preaching at all, but we're totally involved in the story.

TM: What are the challenges and the liberations of doing a play that is 90% music?

JG: I've always loved musical theater, because for me theater is about heightened emotion, and how much more heightened can you be than singing and dancing? I'm very comfortable in the heightened state in the theater; I find much more difficulty working with a text play and getting the actor to go to that place, whereas here the music takes the actor there immediately. The technical challenges are different; they're the challenges of having people walk and talk and sing and hit the pitches and so on. Somehow in this place miracles occur, and I need to cast certain types. I don't know where they arrive from, and the theatre gods give me these gifts, and I have a fabulous cast. Those technical challenges of singing the score are simply a foundation – they're an expectation, they have to be able to do it. For me, as a director, I come in when that's done and I have this fantastic foundation and bedrock of real heightened, palpable emotion that we just have to go with – it carries us there. Sondheim always says that the subtext is carried in the accompaniment, so that, in fact, whether the actor has the depth and complexity that he would have if he was doing an Arthur Miller play, I'm not sure, but the musicians do it for him.

TM: Any final thoughts?

JG: I think it's really interesting, the actors playing Daisy and Violet were nominated for Tonys, but the play was not. It's not a well-known piece, and I think undeservedly so. I'm hoping that people will see it and fall in love with it as I did. I think it's important, in terms of the mission of

this department, that we have the luxury of doing things that are a little different and a little provocative – just not as mainstream. It's my joy to be able to bring this play to life.

A friend of mine was in New York while this play was running, and Emily Skinner and Alice Ripley, who played the twins on Broadway, were actually in the TKTS line, begging people to come see the show. And that makes me very sad.

Biography of Daisy and Violet Hilton

From http://www.phreeque.com/hilton_sisters.html

Daisy and Violet Hilton were born in Brighton, East Sussex, England on February 5, 1908 to a young, unwed barmaid, Kate Skinner. At the age of two weeks, the twins were "adopted" by Mary Hilton, their mother's landlady who was also their midwife. The sisters were pygopagus twins - conjoined at the hips and buttocks. They shared blood circulation and were fused at the pelvis but shared no major organs. Soon after acquiring the twins, Mrs. Hilton put them on exhibition. They were managed by Ike Rose of Rose's Royal Midgets fame and exhibited alongside Rosa and Josefa Blazek, probably the first time in history that two sets of Siamese twins were ever shown together. Daisy and Violet were later taken on an Australian tour with Mary Hilton, her husband Henry, and their daughter Edith. While in Australia, Edith married Myer Myers, a carnival balloon salesman.

When Mary Hilton died, she willed the twins to Edith and Myer. The Myers relocated to the United States and used part of the twins' fortune to build a luxurious, Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired home in San Antonio, Texas. Daisy and Violet spent the majority of the 1920s touring the United States on vaudeville circuits, playing clarinet and saxophone, and singing and dancing. The sisters were a national sensation, counting among their friends a young Bob Hope and Harry Houdini, who allegedly taught them the trick of mentally separating from one another.



Daisy and Violet - English Siamese Twins

By this time, it seems, the Hilton sisters had already become lightning rods for scandal. Seeking friendship outside the abusive Myers home, the twins befriended their advance agent, William "Bill" Oliver. Although the twins claim in their autobiography that their relationship with Oliver was strictly platonic, biographer Dean Jensen believes the twins were two of many mistresses of the smooth-talking promoter and that he slept with both of them many times. In any case, Oliver's wife Mildred accused him of "spending too much time" with them and filed for divorce, and attempted to sue the twins for \$250,000. On the orders of Mrs. Myers, Daisy and Violet asked for the help of a San Antonio lawyer, Martin J. Arnold. Arnold



inquired as to why the sisters, who were over 21 years old and legal adults, remained bound to Mr. and Mrs. Myers, and he was shocked to learn of their situation. He took on the twins' case in January of 1931, helping them file suit against the Myers to break their contract and legally separate from their abusive guardians. Judge W.W. McCrory decided the case in April, awarding the equivalent of nearly \$80,000 to the sisters and allowing the Myers to keep their San Antonio home.

Newly emancipated, Daisy and Violet became citizens of the United States and returned to the only life they'd ever known: show business. In 1932 they appeared in the movie *Freaks*, which dared to pose the question of whether or not conjoined twins can have a love life. Over the coming decade, it would become quite clear that the answer was yes. Violet, the more outgoing of the pair, had a string of celebrity boyfriends,

including the musician Blue Steel, boxer Harry Mason, and guitarist Don Galvan, before becoming engaged in 1933 to bandleader Maurice L. Lambert. She and Lambert began a nationwide search for a clerk who would issue them a marriage license. Each of her requests - in 21 states - was denied on moral grounds, and lawyers were brought in to argue on Violet's behalf. One New York clerk refused to issue the license because Daisy was not also engaged. Though briefly engaged to Jack Lewis, another bandleader, she deemed him too shy for marriage to a Siamese twin.

Unable to get married, Violet and Maurice split. Two years later, however, the twins' agent Terry Turner announced that he could arrange for Violet to marry after all - she only needed a groom. Chosen for the role was Violet's dance partner and a longtime confidant of the twins, James Walker "Jim" Moore. The wedding, such as it was, took place on July 18, 1936, at the Texas Centennial Exposition on the 50-yard line of the Cotton Bowl. Daisy, too, got to experience wedded bliss when she married vaudeville dancer Harold Estep, stage name Buddy Sawyer, at Elmira, New York, on September 17, 1941. Their marriage lasted two weeks.

After the decline of vaudeville, the twins, like countless others, turned to Hollywood. In 1950 the sisters appeared in the film *Chained for Life* as Dorothy and Vivian Hamilton, vaudeville singers. In the film, Vivian takes a dislike to the musician who is courting her sister. Dorothy, on the other



hand, is so smitten that she begs doctors to separate her from her twin so that she might marry. In the end, Vivian shoots and kills Dorothy's beau with a pistol grabbed from a sharpshooter's prop cart. The judge - and the audience - are left to decide whether to send innocent Dorothy to jail, or let guilty Vivian walk free.

Chained for Life was a colossal failure, banned in many places due to its lurid subject matter. Having spent nearly all of their fortune and struggling to survive, the twins opened a hotdog stand, The Hilton Sisters' Snack Bar, in Miami, in 1955, but the business failed in part due to the objections of fellow vendors who didn't like a pair of freaks stealing their business. Short on cash, having been unable to manage their showbusiness earnings responsibly, the sisters decided to bank on the cult revival of their first movie, *Freaks*. In 1962 they arranged to appear at a drive-in movie theater in Charlotte, North Carolina. Here they were abandoned, penniless, by an unscrupulous agent. A kind grocery store manager, Charles Reid, hired the sisters to work in his shop, where they checked and bagged groceries. Reid bought work dresses for the twins, since all they had were show clothes. On January 6, 1969, after battling the Hong Kong flu for some weeks, the twins failed to report for work. Their boss called the police and the sisters were found dead in their small trailer. Daisy died first and forensic evidence suggested that Violet lived for two to four days afterwards, although this is highly questionable since the twins shared circulation and she would have bled to death much sooner. Having no surviving family, the twins were laid to rest beside a Vietnam soldier named Troy Thompson, the son of an acquaintance. At death, the twins owned but \$1,000, a far cry from their formerly vast fortune. Those who met them late in life describe the quintessential "fallen stars": the twins spoke and dressed as they had in their heyday, well into the 1960s.

PT Barnum, Curator of Oddities – a Biography

<http://www.ringling.com/FlashSubContent.aspx?id=11734&parentID=366&assetFolderID=368>

There is no proof that Phineas Taylor Barnum ever said, "there's a sucker born every minute." He did, however, say that "every crowd has a silver lining," and acknowledged that "the public is wiser than many imagine."

In his 80 years, Barnum gave the wise public of the 19th century shameless hucksterism, peerless spectacle, and everything in between -- enough entertainment to earn the title "master showman" a dozen times over. In choosing Barnum as one of the 100 most important people of the millennium, LIFE magazine dubbed him "the patron saint of promoters."

Barnum was born on July 5, 1810, in Bethel, Connecticut. The oldest of five children, he showed his flair for salesmanship at an early age, selling lottery tickets when he was just 12 years old.

When he was 25, Barnum paid \$1,000 to obtain the services of Joice Heth, a woman who claimed to be 161 years old and the nurse of George Washington. "Unquestionably the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the world!" read one of Barnum's handbills. Barnum exhibited her in New York and New England, raking in about \$1,500 per week.

In 1841, Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum on Broadway in New York City. He exhibited "500,000 natural and artificial curiosities from every corner of the globe," and kept traffic moving through the museum with a sign that read, "This way to the egress" -- "egress" was another word for exit, and Barnum's patrons would have to pay another quarter to reenter the Museum!

A year later, he exhibited "The Feejee Mermaid," ostensibly an embalmed mermaid purchased near Calcutta by a Boston seaman. Belief in the mermaid's authenticity was mixed, but nobody doubted Barnum's ability to capture the imagination of the public.

Later in 1842, Barnum hired Charles Stratton, who became world-famous as General Tom Thumb. The two became close friends, and so successful that, in 1844, they had an audience in England with Queen Victoria.

While Barnum's name will forever be connected with the great American circus, it is often said that his greatest success came in 1850, when he presented European opera star Jenny Lind to the American public. "The Swedish Nightingale" sang 95 concerts for Barnum.

In 1854, Barnum wrote and published his autobiography: *The Life Of P.T. Barnum, Written By Himself*. Sixteen years later, his association with the entertainment form that still bears his name would begin.

Barnum was 60 years old when P.T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Circus made its debut. At the time, it was the largest circus venture in American history. "We ought to have a big show," Barnum said. "The public expects it, and will appreciate it." Appreciate it they did: Barnum grossed \$400,000 in his first year of operation.

By 1872, Barnum was already referring to his enterprise as "The Greatest Show On Earth" -- and it was! "P.T. Barnum's Traveling World's Fair, Great Roman Hippodrome and Greatest Show On Earth" covered five acres and accommodated 10,000 seated patrons at a time ... and, to reach more people, took to the rails.

In 1881, Barnum joined promotional forces with James A. Bailey and James L. Hutchinson. The result was "P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show On Earth, And The Great London Circus, Sanger's Royal British Menagerie and The Grand International Allied Shows United." It soon became known as the "Barnum & London Circus."

One of Barnum's biggest successes -- literally! -- came in 1882 with his acquisition of Jumbo. Dubbed "The Towering Monarch of His Mighty Race, Whose Like the World Will Never See Again," Jumbo arrived in New York on April 9, 1882, and attracted enormous crowds on his way to his name becoming a part of the language.

Barnum and Bailey went their separate ways in 1885, but rekindled their business relationship once again in 1888. That year, the "Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show On Earth" first toured America.

Several weeks before he died in his sleep, on April 7, 1891, Barnum read his own obituary: The New York Sun newspaper, responding to Barnum's comment that the press says nice things about people after they die, ran his obituary on the front page with the headline, "Great And Only Barnum -- He Wanted To Read His Obituary -- Here It Is."

Appropriately, it is reported that Barnum's last words were about the show, which was appearing in New York's Madison Square Garden at the time: "Ask Bailey what the box office was at the Garden last night."

Following a funeral service that Barnum himself had planned and the singing of "Auld Lang Syne," the great showman was laid to rest at Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

A History of The Musical Vaudeville

by John Kenrick

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circuit to stretch from coast to coast. Martin Beck built **The Palace Theatre** to serve as his flagship house, but it was soon taken over by (who else?) Keith and Albee, who absorbed the entire Orpheum circuit into their organization. In a matter of months, The Palace quickly the Victoria as the most sought after vaudeville booking.

Top managers and theatrical professionals packed Monday matinees at the Palace, so a successful appearance there could lead to good bookings nationwide. Anxious performers often accepted low pay to get on the bill, and would ever afterwards boast about "the time we played The Palace."

Meeting a Need

By the 1880's, the Industrial Revolution had changed the once rural face of America. Half of the population was now concentrated in towns and cities, working at regulated jobs that left most of them with two things they never had back on the farm – a little spare cash and weekly leisure time. These people wanted affordable entertainment on a regular basis. Most variety shows were too coarse for women or children to attend, and minstrel shows were already declining in popularity. In a world where phonographs, film, radio and television did not yet exist, something new was needed to fill the gap.

Vaudeville also tried to bridge a social gap that had divided American audiences ever since the upper and lower classes clashed in a deadly 1849 riot.

After the Astor Place Riot of 1849 entertainment in New York City was divided along class lines: opera was chiefly for the upper middle and upper classes, minstrel shows and melodramas for the middle class, variety shows in concert saloons for men of the working class and the slumming middle class. Vaudeville was developed by entrepreneurs seeking higher profits from a wider audience.

- **Robert W. Snyder** in *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), **Kenneth T. Jackson**, editor, p. 1226.

Tony Pastor was the first manager to present commercially successful "clean" variety. He earned fame as a variety vocalist, songwriter and manager on New York's Bowery. But his ambitions reached far beyond the bawdy standards that marked Bowery entertainments. A devout Catholic and attentive father, Pastor wanted to provide family-friendly entertainment. When he started presenting a clean variety show at New York's Fourteenth Street Theatre on **Oct. 24, 1881**, the location said a great deal about his intentions.

As an early center for public transportation, Manhattan's **Union Square** district included most of New York City's top theatres, restaurants and shops. Respectable theatergoers had no objection to attending performances there. Each week Pastor offered a different line-up of quality acts, with reserved seats going for fifty cents. He often appeared in the star spot himself, singing such sentimental favorites as "The Band Played On" –

*Casey would waltz
With the strawberry blonde
And the band played on.
He'd waltz round the floor
With the girl he adored
And the band played on.
But his brain was so loaded
He nearly exploded,
The poor girl would shake with alarm.
He married the girl
With the strawberry curl
And the band played on.*

Pastor's "clean" variety show was an instant success, drawing an enthusiastic audience from all age groups and classes – including some of the most influential people in New York.

Calling it Vaudeville

Other producers soon picked up on this innovation. Beginning in Boston in 1883, **Benjamin Franklin Keith** and **Edward F. Albee** used the fortune they made staging unauthorized productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to start building a chain of ornate theatres across the northeastern United States. Stealing Pastor's format, they instituted a policy of continuous multiple daily performances, which they called "vaudeville."

The origins of the term **vaudeville** are unclear. Some sources claim the word was a bastardization of "voix de ville," French slang for "songs of the town" – others say it came from "vaux de Vire," fifteenth century satiric songs written by Olivier Basselin, a native of the Vire valley in Normandy.

We get yet another explanation from vaudevillian **Sophie Tucker** in her autobiography *Some of These Days* (1945, pp. 155-156). Her agent, the now-legendary William Morris, claimed that a

red windmill in the Vire valley started serving wine and cheese to farmers waiting to have their wheat milled. Traveling entertainers took advantage of this readymade audience by performing for the crowd and passing the hat. This arrangement proved so popular that others soon copied it. Morris insisted this place not only gave birth to the term "vaudeville" – it also inspired the name of the popular Parisian nightclub *Le Moulin Rouge* ("The Red Mill").

Keeping It Clean

As vaudeville spread through the United States, major theatre chains or **circuits** were built by **Sullivan & Consodine**, **Alexander Pantages**, film mogul **Marcus Loew** and others. All of them were tough businessmen, but no one could match Keith and Albee's cutthroat tactics, or their ruthless insistence that acts keep their material clean at all times. Warnings were posted backstage in all of Keith & Albee's theatres. Here is an example –

Don't say "slob" or "son of a gun" or "hully gee*" on the stage unless you want to be canceled peremptorily. Do not address anyone in the audience in any manner. If you do not have the ability to entertain Mr. Keith's audience with risk of offending them, do the best you can. Lack of talent will be less open to censure than would be an insult to a patron. If you are in doubt as to the character of your act consult the local manager before you go on stage, for if you are guilty of uttering anything sacrilegious or even suggestive you will be immediately closed and will never again be allowed in a theatre where Mr. Keith is in authority.

- as quoted by C. Samuels and L. Samuels in *Once Upon a Stage* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1974), p. 89.

(***Note:** Since "Hully gee" was an abbreviation of "Holy Jesus!," it is easy to see why this now meaningless phrase could be considered offensive.)

It was always understood that headliners could bend the rules, but transgressions by lesser known performers were not tolerated. In Sophie Tucker's autobiography, she explains that Keith's theater managers assessed every act during the first performance of the week's engagement –

Between the (Monday) matinee and the night show the blue envelopes began to appear in the performers mailboxes backstage . . . Inside would be a curt order to cut out a blue line of a song, or piece of business. Sometimes there was a suggestion of something you could substitute for the material the manager ordered out . . . There was no arguing about the orders in the blue envelopes. They were final. You obeyed them or quit. And if you quit, you got a black mark against your name in the head office and you didn't work on the Keith Circuit anymore. During my early years on the Keith Circuit, I took my orders from my blue envelope and – no matter what I said or did backstage (and it was plenty) – when I went on for the Monday night show, I was careful to keep within bounds.

- *Some of These Days*, pp.148-149.

Thanks to the tint of those dreaded envelopes, anything risqué came to be known as "blue" material. However, as historian Robert W. Snyder points out in *The Voice of the City* (Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1989, p. 132), vaudeville's exuberance and irreverence "challenged the Victorian

code of sentiment and gentility – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly," leading to "a new urban vision of success and happiness based on luxury and consumption."

Keith's authority extended far beyond his own theaters. In 1906, Keith and Albee organized most of their fellow circuit owners into a Managers Association which coordinated all bookings. Performers who fell out of personal favor with Keith or Albee had little hope of finding work in any big time vaudeville house. Keith's most infamous quote was, "I never trust a man I can't buy," but he was almost benign compared to Albee.

. . . scarcely anyone mentions E.F. Albee without intense bitterness. . . Mr. Albee, with his relentless air of holiness, was totally without humor and grim visage as he wielded his destructive power.

- **Marian Spitzer, *The Palace* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 86.**

By 1907, Variety reported that vaudeville was earning \$30 million a year. While enjoying the lion's share of this haul, Keith & Albee were powerful enough to neutralize anything or anyone who threatened to weaken their control of vaudeville. They crushed several attempts by performers to unionize. When a union called "The White Rats" showed signs of succeeding, Albee set up a puppet union called National Vaudeville Artists, refusing to book performers who did not join his group. It cost millions, but NVA soon wiped the White Rats out of existence. Albee kept this so-called union under his firm control, silencing all opposition to his often abusive treatment of performers.

Working the Circuits

Appearing in vaudeville was no vacation. A successful act toured for forty or more weeks a year, doing "one nighters," split-weeks or weekly stands depending on a theatre's size. The number of performances per day varied from circuit to circuit. In the musical *On Your Toes* (1936), lyricist Larry Hart summed it up this way –

*It's two a day for Keith,
And three a day for Loew;
Pantages plays us four a day
Besides the supper show.*

Performers put up with these demanding schedules because even those who did not reach the level of headliner could make good money. In 1919, when the average factory worker earned less than \$1,300, a small time Keith circuit performer playing a forty-two week season at \$75 per week earned \$3,150 a year. Women, uneducated immigrants, the poor – anyone with determination and a talent to entertain could earn a solid, respectable living. Few other fields could claim to offer the disadvantaged such accessible rewards in the early 20th Century.

Low ticket prices helped define the audience for vaudeville. In 1912, when seats to a Broadway hit went for as much as \$2, big-time vaudeville tickets topped out between \$1 and seventy-five cents.

That same year, a Sage Foundation survey determined that approximately 700,000 New Yorkers

attended 40 low-priced vaudeville theatres each week, and estimated that the audience was 60 percent working class (versus a mere 2 percent of a Broadway audience), and 64 percent male.

Many vaudeville theatres were poorly heated in winter and became oversized ovens in summer. Dressing rooms were small and filthy, with little if any ventilation. Musical accompaniment could be anything from a full orchestra to a lone pianist, and the quality of these musicians varied.

"I worked to all kinds of music – from bad to awful. Some bands were really great. For instance, there was the band at the RKO Palace in New Orleans. That band was so good it used to stop the show. Louis Prima was in that band. And when they played an overture – wow! On the other hand, there was the band at the New York Palace. Owen Jones was the leader. They had some women in the band, and they were so polite they used to let the women finish first – that's how the music sounded. Every act that went on had to stop in the middle and ask Owen Jones to take the tempo over again. Everybody out front knew what was happening. This bas***d was giving every act trouble. He was a musician but he couldn't cut a show."

- Billy Glason as quoted by editor Bill Smith in *The Vaudevillians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1976), p. 43.

Small to Big Time

More than 25,000 people performed in vaudeville over its 50-plus years of existence, working their way through the three levels defined by the trade newspaper *Variety* –

"Small time" – small town theatres and cheaper theaters in larger towns. Performers made as little as \$15 a week in the early years, closer to \$75 over time. These often crude theatres were the training ground for new performers, or the place for old-timers on the skids to eke out a few final seasons.

"Medium time" – good theaters in a wide range of cities, offering salaries of up to a few hundred dollars a week. Performers seen here were either on the way up or on the way down.

"Big Time" – the finest theaters in the best cities, using a two performance-a-day format. Most big time acts earned hundreds per week, and headliners could command \$1,000 a week -- or far more.

Some performers insisted that there was only "big," "small" and "small-small" time. However you labeled them, there were varying levels of vaudeville. Years later, a vaudeville dancer explained how miserable the "small time" experience could be –

In small time we worked on the Death Trail – that was the name for one-nighters in places you never heard of, like Missoula, Montana, places where nobody would go unless they really needed work – and we did. They weren't theatres, they were kind of stores, with benches instead of seats. When the show began, the baker, the laundry truck driver and maybe the garbage man dropped what they were doing and jumped in to play the music. They were the band. They'd come in and they couldn't play . . . But we got a lot of experience. The Bert Levy time was really awful. Their houses were often in the same town we were working in, but theirs weren't even as

good as ours . . .

- Mack Lathrop, as quoted in *The Vaudevillians*, p. 138.

The most celebrated vaudeville house of the early 1900s was New York's **Victoria**, located on 42nd Street just West of Broadway. Opera impresario **Oscar Hammerstein I** built it on the cheap with used materials, but his son William managed it so well that it made millions and became the most coveted booking in the business. Aside from standard acts, the Victoria booked murderesses, explorers – anyone who had generated enough headlines to provoke audience interest. Oscar channeled the profits into his ill-fated opera projects. When the Victoria finally faced serious competition, the disinterested Hammerstein sold it, and developers turned it into office space.

The Palace

The **Orpheum Circuit** had handsomely appointed houses across the western United States. When joined to the existing Keith houses in the East, it formed the only "big time" vaudeville

The Palace became even more important when unemployed performers started hanging out on the concrete traffic triangle across from it to gossip and seek word of possible bookings. Since so many unemployed performers "vacationed" on this stretch of sidewalk, wags referred to it as "the beach." (This triangle now draws larger crowds than ever as the location of the TKTS discount ticket booth.)

Los Angeles' Historic Broadway Theatre District

Broadway - a main north/south thoroughfare in downtown Los Angeles - is home to a notable collection of grand old motion picture palaces, most of which date back to the 1920's and 1930's.

In fact, L.A.'s Broadway theatre district represents the largest concentration of pre-World War II movie palaces in America.

Many of these theatres began as vaudeville stages, where live acts like the **Marx Brothers** and **Sophie Tucker** entertained the wealthy families of early Los Angeles. With the advent of film, they were transformed into movie theaters.

Behind their deceptively simple exteriors, these movie theatres from Hollywood's golden age were breathtakingly lavish temples, and ample proof of the popularity of the fare that of Tinseltown had to offer during that Depression era - virtual palaces where the movie-goer was king.

They featured sweeping marble staircases leading to ornate balconies, plush seats, and soaring, star-sprinkled ceilings, along with spacious, elaborately crafted interiors,



gilded rococo designs and a wide range of flamboyant architectural styles.

Unfortunately, today most of these former shrines to Hollywood are currently in very sad shape. Many are simply gone. Only a handful retain much of their former glory.

What happened?

In 1922, Grauman opened the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, and the focus of movie-going in L.A. shifted from downtown to Hollywood Boulevard.

After WW2, L.A.'s population migrated out of downtown to the suburbs, where local malls & multiplexes made it unnecessary for people to trek downtown to shop or to see a movie. All of downtown suffered the effects, and the Broadway district fell into decline.

And even though much of downtown L.A. has undergone a renaissance in recent years, Broadway is still pretty rundown; its dirty sidewalks are currently lined with cheap storefronts and noisy arcades catering to the large Spanish-speaking population, along with the transients from nearby Skid Row.

Two of the historic former theatres are now being used as churches, two or three of them are used exclusively for "location" work (where movies and TV shows are shot), and some of the theatres are closed - and in danger of being demolished. (In 2008, L.A. began seriously considering restoring the theatre district - but so far only a few of the theatres have been restored...)

★ The Los Angeles Theatre (at 615 S. Broadway), built in 1931 in the French baroque style of Louis XIV, it was a virtual Hollywood cathedral. Famous for its huge crystal fountain in the lobby, the Los Angeles Theatre was considered one of the four or five finest movie palaces in the world. Not an inch of the interior was left undecorated, from the elegant stage curtains and ornate balcony, to the intricately-carved ceiling of its lobby. It is spectacular. When the Los Angeles Theatre was about to go under during the Depression, **Charlie Chaplin** paid an exorbitant amount of money to keep the posh 1,967-seat theater afloat, so that he could have the grand premiere of his masterpiece "*City Lights*" there. The Los Angeles Theatre recently closed and is currently sitting idle, except for occasional film shoots. In October of 1998, a major scene from the Andy Kaufman biopic, "*Man On the Moon*" (starring **Jim Carrey**) was filmed there. They duplicated Kaufman's famous 1979 concert at Carnegie Hall, with over 1,000 extras (ads for extras in local newspapers asked people to show up wearing "upscale New York evening wear.") But you may still be able to see its gorgeous interior via the "Last Remaining Seats" series (see details below.)



★ The Orpheum (at 842 S. Broadway), built in 1926, is another Broadway theater that has been wonderfully preserved - from its crystal chandeliers to its grand staircase, right down to its mammoth, original Wurlitzer pipe organ (which is still played, on occasion). Open over 70 years now, the Orpheum is still a spectacularly beautiful theater. Its ornate, gilded ceilings soar nearly five stories above its 2,190 seats. Its lavish Paris Opera architecture features large balconies, opera boxes, even a marble lobby which is decorated with fine sculpture, gold/copper leaf, and 20-foot-high crystal chandeliers. The Orpheum probably has the most illustrious history of any theater on Broadway; its Wurlitzer organ provided music for the silent movies and vaudeville acts back in the 1920's; during the theater's heyday in the 30's & 40's, its stage featured such live entertainers as **Bob Hope**, **Bing Crosby**, **Lena Horne**, **Eddie Cantor**, the **Marx Bros.**, **Jack Benny**, **Will Rogers**, **George Burns & Gracie Allen**, and **Duke Ellington**. It is one of the few Broadway theaters that was not only still open, but was also currently showing modern movies in English (although theater employees often outnumbered the customers). In 2001, the Orpheum reopened after a \$3 million make-over, including the addition of air conditioning, a new orchestra pit, refurbished dressing rooms, and the theatres re-lighting of the rooftop neon sign (which hasn't worked since WW2). The owner plans to use it as a live event venue, for concerts and live theatre. The Orpheum is also often leased as a location site for filming Hollywood movies and TV shows. For instance, when Tom Hanks was making *"That Thing You Do"* and needed to shoot a scene set at the Orpheum in Pittsburgh, he shot the scene at the L.A. Orpheum instead. And in 2006, it will be used for episodes of **"American Idol"**. You can see the interior of the theatre on the [Conservancy tour](#). (213) 239-0939

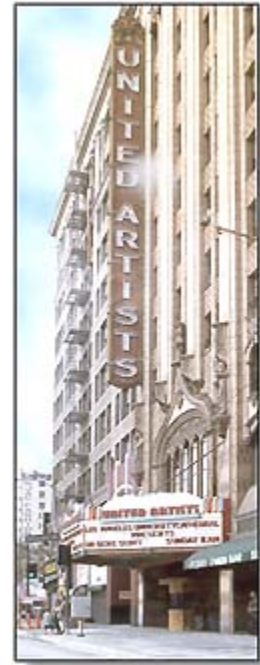
★ The Million Dollar Theater (at 307 S. Broadway) built in 1918 by **Sid Grauman** at the then-astounding cost of one million dollars, it was the first movie palace built in Los Angeles; this elaborate gothic/baroque theater is huge - containing 2,345 seats, and was the site of many old-time premieres. It was later used as a church, and after the church relocated to another theatre (The State), the Million Dollar Theater had been closed and shuttered. However, in early 2008, the theatre reopened as a venue for live stage performances, with an emphasis on multicultural productions. In May of 2008, it hosted a concert by *Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan*, and the theatre will be hosting some of the *Last Remaining Seats* screenings.



★ The State Theatre (at 703 S. Broadway) was built in 1921 by MGM; it offers 2,450 seats, making it the largest of all the Broadway theaters. **Judy Garland** (then known as Frances Gumm) performed her as part of a sister act back in the 30's. The interior is a mix of medieval, classical, and Spanish design. The State was still open not long ago, showing modern English-language movies, but it was recently converted into a church. As such, it is now off-limits to the Conservancy tours. It has been occasionally used for movie productions - it was used, for instance, in the 1995 film, *"Wild Bill"*

(with **Jeff Bridges**) and in the music video by singer **Jewel**, "*You Were Meant For Me*."
(213) 239-0962

★ The United Artists Theatre (at 933 S. Broadway) was fashioned to resemble the French Quarter of New Orleans; it featured a domed, mirrored ceiling, and offered 2,141 seats **Mary Pickford** showed up for its 1927 opening. Its walls still have murals of Mary and **Douglas Fairbanks** in historic poses. It has been wonderfully restored, but until recently was used as a church by the unconventional Dr. Gene Scott. But in 2011, the United Artists building was bought by an East Coast investment group, which plans to turn the 13-story building into a boutique hotel, opening in 2013. No word yet on how the theatre itself will be used. In the meanwhile, you can see it if you take the [Conservancy tour](#).



★ The Palace Theatre (at 630 S. Broadway). Built in 1911 as part of the Orpheum vaudeville chain (Houdini, Al Jolson, W.C. Fields, Fred Astaire and the Marx Brothers performed on its stage), it is now the oldest remaining Orpheum Theatre in the United States. It seats 1,167, in a replica of a Renaissance Florentine palace. But it has been reduced in size. In 2011, the Palace reopened after a \$1 million restoration Check out their website at downtownpalace.com. You can also see the interior of the theatre on the [Conservancy tour](#) (213) 239-0959

Alas, many other former Broadway movie palaces are either gone or turned into indoor swap meets (although many of their ornate outside entrances remain the same), including the **Tower** (802 S. Broadway) where "*The Mambo Kings*" was filmed), the **Roxie** (598 S. Broadway), the **Warner Bros/Pantages** (534 S. Broadway), the **Globe** (744 S. Broadway) and the **Rialto** (812 South Broadway)..

But you don't have to settle for looking at the exteriors or attend a church service just to take a loving look at the interiors of these grand old movie palaces.

Guided walking tours of this Broadway Theater district are offered every Saturday by **Los Angeles Conservancy Walking Tours**, and these tours will take you right inside three of these classic movie palaces (often the Orpheum, the Palace and the United Artists, but interior access may vary by tour). These walking tours cost \$8, begin at 10 AM, and last approximately two hours. They recommend that you make reservations for the tour a month in advance.

Discussion Questions

- How do the songs affect your experience of the play? Do you think you would feel differently about the characters and plot if there was only spoken dialogue?
- Is there a contemporary form of entertainment analogous to freak shows?
- How would you deal with never being able to be alone?

- Do you think a “happy ending” was ever possible for Violet and Daisy?