

Edward Franklin Albee II

By Anna Jennings

Edward Franklin Albee II was born in Machias, Maine on October 8th, 1857 to Nathan and Amanda Albee ("Deaths"). In his youth, he attended primary school in Boston, Massachusetts, where he later sold newspapers and worked as a delivery boy for a department store ("E.F. Albee"). His first exposure to show business came with an ensemble role in Charles Fetcher's play, *No Thoroughfare*, his first and only performance experience. At age sixteen, Albee saw P.T. Barnum's "Greatest Show on Earth" in 1873, beginning his career in the circus (Erdman 46). Albee was a "tent boy," completing tasks such as caring for the hippopotamus and preparing concessions for spectators ("E.F. Albee"). He later said of his experience that only the circus provides the requisite range of experience for the future successful businessman.

Albee spent about seven years working in the circus. After returning to Boston, Albee married Laura S. Smith on May 13th, 1881 ("Deaths"). Soon after his marriage, he visited Benjamin F. Keith's ten-cent Gaiety Museum in Boston, which presented a variety of short acts, much like the circus (Hanley 62). Though the two may have met earlier, as Keith was also a circus man, their meeting in 1885 marked the beginning of the most powerful partnership in vaudeville (Erdman 47). Keith's museum was struggling, so he asked Albee, who had quickly risen through the ranks, how he could improve business. Albee said to Keith: "You either have the wrong show on the right street or the right show on the wrong street" (Hanley 62). Due to the museum's prime location in Boston, the two decided they had the wrong show on the right street. Albee noticed the success of the Hollis Theater's production of *The Mikado*, which sold out nearly every night (Hanley 63). Albee created a miniature, rip-off version of *The Mikado*, with a lower ticket price, hoping to appeal to those theatre-goers unable to see the sold-out production (Erdman 47). This model was extraordinarily successful and launched Keith's business into vast expansion and high profit, all with the help of Albee.

They opened the Bijou Theater in Boston in 1886, the Gaiety Museum in Providence in 1887, the Bijou in Philadelphia in 1889, and the Hippodrome in New York City's Times Square in 1893, with many more theaters across the nation to follow (Erdman 47). Albee was very particular about the appearance of the theaters, investing large sums of money into creating lavish theaters with decadent decoration— "nothing is too rich for the vaudeville stage" (Albee 217-218). In his 1920 article, "Twenty Years of Vaudeville," published in *Theatre Magazine*,

Albee describes the reason for the success of the Keith-Albee theaters: “In building a vaudeville theatre today, we go into every detail scientifically, artistically, and psychologically” (Albee 218). Albee carefully designed every detail, including color, acoustics, lighting, seating, and ventilation.

The careful design proved fruitful. The Keith circuit became the “largest theatrical organization known to the history of the stage, ” and Albee was “perhaps the most powerful administrator vaudeville ever had” (Hanley 92; DiMeglio 15). E.F. Albee was the brains of the Keith circuit. He marketed, produced, censored, casted, and oversaw every aspect of operation (Erdman 2). Keith and Albee also introduced the concept of “continuous performance” (Hanley 63). By running performances in rotation all day, Keith theaters presented more various acts and generated more profit. Albee was such a talented manager, Keith eventually made him a partner. After Keith’s death in 1914, he left Albee in charge of the company and 15 million dollars, half of Keith’s fortune (“Deaths”).

Among Albee’s notable contributions to the vaudeville business was bringing credibility to the existing “variety” genre, which stood on the disreputable fringes of show business (“E.F. Albee”). For Albee, making “vaudeville and vaudevillians respectable in the eyes of the world was almost a fetish” (“E.F. Albee”). It was important to Albee that vaudeville be considered a wholesome, pure form of entertainment. Therefore, Albee carefully censored acts and posted guidelines for performers, threatening dismissal for any infraction (DiMeglio 8). Notices posted reminded artists not to include profanity, “mother-in-law jokes,” mocking of races and religions (even Jewish jokes by Jewish performers), ridicule of policemen, and many other “destructive” elements. Believing that entertainment can be constructive, Albee told artists to “Drop that stuff. It is beneath an artist of your talent and intelligence” (“E.F. Albee”). Additionally, Albee had the theater staff police the audience for appropriate behavior (Erdman 12). While a certain amount of suggestiveness and innuendo remained for the audience’s titillation, Albee was successful in making “vaudeville theatre a part of community life” as a wholesome entertainment (Albee 220).

Albee himself did not enjoy a pure reputation. Keith and Albee were known by some as a “villainous pair,” as their bigtime theaters had an intense rivalry with the smalltime theaters (DiMeglio 20). Keith and Albee created United Booking Office (UBO), a booking agency which scheduled routes for performers in Keith theaters and other theaters. Eventually, the organization became so powerful that it was near impossible to work as a vaudeville artist without going

through the UBO, which also charged the artists a percentage for bookings (Erdman 57). Among his critics was Groucho Marx, who said “Albee was the owner of a large cotton plantation and the actors were his slaves” (qtd. DiMeglio 25). However, later Albee did gain praise from some for respectful treatment of artists. After WWI, Albee was instrumental in forming two organizations, the Vaudeville Managers’ Protective Association and the National Vaudeville Artists, responsible for protecting both artists and managers in negotiations (“E.F. Albee”). Albee explains that after twenty years, an agreeable relationship between artists and managers now existed in vaudeville and many agreed (219-220).

As vaudeville declined and cinema gained popularity, the Keith circuit merged with Joseph P. Kennedy’s Orpheum circuit to form a chain of theaters known as Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), a part of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) (Erdman 169). Albee died in Palm Beach, Florida on March 11th, 1930 (“Deaths”). His wife Laura, his daughter Ethel, and son Reed Adelbert survived Albee. Reed would eventually adopt future playwright, Edward Franklin Albee III, named after his impresario grandfather (Konkle). An obituary in the *New York Times* summed up Albee’s contribution: “Mr. Albee was a vital and aggressive figure, who organized and stabilized a fairly unorganized part of the theatre.”

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Vesta Victoria

by Anna Jennings

Victoria Lawrence was born in Leeds, England on November 26th, 1873 into a theatrical family. Her mother, Annie Lawrence, whose stage name was “Marion Nelson,” was a singer; her father, Joe Lawrence, was called “The Up-Side-Down Comedian” for singing on his head (Fields 30-31). She toured with her parents as a little girl, performing at the age of six as “Baby Victoria.” In 1883, at the age of nine, she first performed at the Royal Cambridge Theater in London, as “Little Victoria.” She evolved into a solo performer between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, finally adopting her stage name “Vesta Victoria” (31).

At age twenty, after being recruited by American talent managers, Vesta completed her first American tour (Fields 31). She made her American debut in New York at the Tony Pastor Theater. Vesta’s run was extended, making her “one of the very few single women to play there for a season” (Laurie). Quickly gaining fame and fans, she received gifts of jewelry, which would eventually grow into a vast jewelry collection (Fields 31-32). She earned a higher wage than most new performers, initially \$400 a week. Later, on a ten-week contract with the Keith circuit, she made \$3000 a week (Laurie). Consistently a box office hit, Vesta earned one of the highest wages of any female vaudevillian.

The voluptuous, “singing comedienne” had a voice that was “low, clear, and energetic, ‘bell-like with a bit of throatiness’” (Fields 31). Vesta was known for her comedic songs, inspired by her personal sad stories with happy-endings. A vaudeville audience would expect audience participation, sing-along, choreography, impersonations, and vivid characterizations in a Vesta Victoria act (32). She usually changed costumes for each song, wearing lavish, brightly colored, costumes, or even tattered clothing, depending on the character of the song (Whaley). With the help of her songwriters, Harry Pether and Fred Leigh, Vesta had many hit songs. One of her most popular was “Waiting at Church,” about a bride being stranded at the altar because her husband to be's wife wouldn't let him leave. Her song “Poor John” describes a girl meeting a future mother-in-law who is disappointed in her son’s choice fiancée, lamenting: “Poor John!” (Gray). Other favorite songs included “Daddy Won’t Buy Me A Bow-Wow,” “It Ain’t All Honey,” and “Some Would Marry Anything with Trousers On” (Slide 159).

Possessing “personal magnetism that fairly lift[ed] her audience of their seats,” Vesta was particularly gifted at building a “rapport with audiences” (Whaley; Fields 32). Vesta effectively

customized her act for American and English audiences, always building rapport and receiving praise from critics. Between 1893 and 1911, Vesta performed in both America and England, though she preferred performing in her home country. For some time in England, Vesta collaborated with vaudevillian Vesta Tilley. The two became the most successful English female performers of their time (Fields 32). After 1911, Vesta remained mostly in England, not returning to perform in America until 1927 (33).

Both audiences and critics loved Vesta's irony and self-deprecation in her songs. Critic Cady Whaley wrote in *The Billboard* in 1907 that she could be "funny by the crook of a finger of the position of the feet." Her act developed between 1893 and 1911 into her signature humorous yet alluring style, while her stage presence and rapport with the audience always remained strong. Critic Sime Silverman wrote about her 1907 tour: "Miss Vesta has not lost any of her charm; she still remains the magnetic, pretty, buxom character songstress, the idol of the New York public" (Silverman). Vesta frequently added new songs to her repertoire. Additionally, her charismatic stage presence allowed her longer stage time than most vaudeville acts. While most acts were under twenty minutes, Vesta's were often longer. In 1907, her act spanned forty-nine minutes, "the record length for a single act in vaudeville" at the time (Laurie).

On September 20th, 1897, she married Fred McAvoy, who managed a music hall (Fields 32). In 1898, they had a daughter, Irene, but later divorced in 1903. In 1912, remarried to Herbert Terry; the couple divorced in 1926. During WWI, she performed in vaudeville theaters in England and entertained English troops (Gray). Vesta retired in 1918 at the end of the War, after a thirty-five-year career in vaudeville (Fields 33). In the next decades, Vesta came out of retirement for a handful special appearances onstage and in film. In 1927, she performed in America for the first time since 1911 (33). In 1931, Vesta recorded many of her signature songs from her time on the vaudeville stage. Vesta Victoria was unique as she "continued to perform successfully long after vaudeville disappeared" (33).

She died in London on April 7th, 1951. Joe Laurie Jr. writes in an obituary: "Miss Victoria was the pioneer of the great English ear-and-eye-arresting artists who came to America." Critics and audiences loved Vesta Victoria for her catchy songs, powerful voice, humor, and buxom beauty. Vesta was one of the most successful and influential female vaudeville performers from Britain. As critic Sime Silverman wrote in 1907, she was "unexcelled and impossible of imitation. Many try, but all fail."

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