

Vaudeville

The term *vaudeville* may derive from a part of France known as the Vau (valley) de Vire, where a certain kind of light song was popular. In the United States, however, the entertainment form known as vaudeville is a variety show that developed from the saloons of the mid-1800s, where light entertainment was provided for hard-working cowboys, lumberjacks, and miners.

While vaudeville was mostly lighthearted, performances invariably conformed to a strict structure: Up to 20 live acts by acrobats, clowns, comedians, contortionists, dancers, jugglers, magicians, mimes, singers, and trick cyclists were presented in a single program or “bill” performed twice each night. Acts were presentational, aimed directly at the audience. Anything that promised to astound or entertain — from humorous sketches and short plays to feats of strength and animal tricks — was fair game. The bill was organized to guarantee something for everyone, but acts were not related in any way.

Acts traveled from place to place, usually performing in the theatres of a single vaudeville circuit or chain, to find new audiences. Highly critical of poor performances, vaudeville audiences were known to hiss and catcall when displeased. Audience members often ate, drank, smoked, and talked during performances.

By the early 1900s, vaudeville evolved into the theatrical form of the American musical, which to this day uses a storyline and related music performances to patch together often distinct “acts.”

Adapted from *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, ed. J.R. Brown, Oxford University Press, 1995.