

# Minstrels, magic lanterns and magicians: the rise and dispersion of American Vaudeville

Research Fellow, Dr Elisa deCourcy recently spent a few weeks at the Harry Ransom Center, a world-class archive of European and American visual and literary culture at the University of Texas, Austin. The Center is currently [showing a landmark exhibition](#) about the rise, character and metamorphosis of Vaudeville on the American entertaining landscape. The exhibition draws from 32 different collections across the Ransom Archive. Lead curator, Dr Eric Colleary generously set aside an afternoon to explain the logic of the exhibition and to swap notes about the magic lantern's place in Vaudeville with Elisa.



Dr Eric Colleary, Cline curator of Theatre and Performing Arts, in Vaudeville beside a case of lantern slides and a magic lantern, at the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

Vaudeville was a form of theatre featuring a variety of different short acts that was popular in the mid-nineteenth century. The word 'vaudeville' can be traced to fifteenth century France, when travelling balladist Oliver Basselin toured his repertoire of songs: Vaux-de-Vire, across the Norman countryside. Vaudeville was also hugely popular in Australia where the Tivoli Circuit supporting a variety of Vaudevillian acts well into the twentieth century.

Vaudeville's American peak in the 1860s coincided with the extension of the railway network which allowed journeymen Vaudevillians to travel quickly and efficiently around the country. The beginning of its slow demise at the century's end was similarly propelled by transportation innovation, namely the construction of highways which signalled the rise of American Individualism. The highway, the corollary

of which was car ownership, represented a movement toward individually moderated schedules and an investment in domestic or more insular entertaining experiences such as cinema, and later television.

Eric book-ended the exhibition with these two wider socio-technological developments. But he was quick to highlight that while Vaudeville as a form died out in the early decades of the twentieth century its content went on to influence new media experiences. At the height of its popularity, Vaudeville played a significant role in defining what it meant to be American, for a cohort of first-generation ‘citizens’ grappling with lack of a concrete and cohesive identity narrative. The magic lantern slides in the exhibition sat in this third room focussed on this idea of proto-national definition and in a section labelled ‘Early Film’. In a glass vitrine with purposefully angled spotlights for elucidation, were two slides, both made by the New York manufacturer, Joseph Boggs Beale (1841-1926). Beale was a prolific slide manufacturer. Most of his career was spent working for C.W. Briggs where he was responsible for creating upward of 2500 different lantern slides, many of which would go on to be mass-produced.<sup>1</sup>



Top slide: Joseph Boggs Beale, 'The Mayflower at sea', 1891, standard glass slide. Bottom slide: Joseph Boggs Beale 'Home from the war, or, A Soldier's Return', 1902, wooden framed panorama slide. Both from Joseph Boggs Beale Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin Texas.

The top slide is a standard American glass slide, a chromolithograph transfer, showing the Mayflower conquering high seas. The bottom is a delicately hand-painted wooden-framed slide of a family reunion with a soldier returning after the American War of Independence. Despite the War's end over a century

earlier, this story of conquest over a 'foreign' power held salience and enduring appeal in the Vaudeville circuit.



Magic lantern projector, unidentified manufacturer, c.1900. Note electrical cabling peeping from the back of the device.

The slides were coupled by a beautifully hand-painted tin magic lantern. Eric pointed out that the lantern was a significant object in the suite of largely paper-based Vaudevillian ephemera. Yet, its resonance was not simply in its object status but also in the shift it represented. The modest optics of the lantern meant that its throw was not nearly long enough for it to be used in a public venue. This was a lantern for the home. Moreover, it is a lantern that would have been originally powered by paraffin, but which has since been electrified. These elements of the lantern's provenance are significant to the general tenor of the *Vaudeville* exhibition. Eric commented that like sheet music and even minstrelsy black-face make up, slides and lanterns moved from being theatrical elements of Vaudeville to becoming items that people visiting these shows could purchase and then use in their own homes. Consequently, the lantern encapsulates the shift towards Vaudeville's end from going out and being entertained to buying the cultural products to do the entertaining in the comfort and convenience of the home.

Performers, including Harry Houdini, who began their careers on the vaudeville circuit, emerged as solo theatrical acts as the Vaudeville craze faded. Elements of animation and comic acting that burgeoning in Vaudeville circuits would inform the exaggerated gesturing of early sketch cinema. And, we know that lantern performances and lectures existed as discrete experiences alongside Vaudeville and continued well into the mid-Twentieth century.

*Vaudeville* is an impressive exhibition that examines the confluence of technologies and theoretical forms that contributed to this vein of theatre, while being attune to the wider socio-political American context that directed people's appetite and appreciation for Vaudeville. It is part of a wider movement that is trying to reconnect different media and cultural experiences, that previously historians and curators have tended to analyse separately.

<sup>1</sup> See: Terry Borton and Deborah Borton, *Before the Movies: American magic lantern entertainment and the nation's first great screen artist, Joseph Boggs Beale*, New Barnet, John Libbey Publishing, 2014.