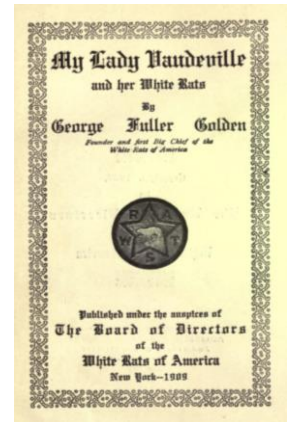


My Lady Vaudeville and her White Rats, 1909

Vaudeville was a theatre-based variety show that gained popularity in the 1880s. It became an important form of mass culture, drawing large audiences through the 1920s. Vaudeville and other popular entertainment at the turn of the nineteenth century, including circus, minstrel shows, medicine shows, and sideshows, operated within the larger trends of mass society. This is an excerpt from the memoir, *My Lady Vaudeville and her White Rats*, written by vaudeville artist and labor organizer, George Fuller Golden.



[Editor's note: In this excerpt the author, George Fuller Golden, recounts a conversation between a young vaudeville performer he nicknamed Dromio, who wanted to start a Vaudeville labor union, and Dromio's skeptical friend, Michael Mantwa.]

[Mantwa] "...Look at the practical side of your wild scheme, or dream, or plan, or whatever you choose to call it. As I said, [Vaudeville performers] are not laborers with the same mentality or social status as each other. How are you ever going to reconcile into one Brotherhood people of such divergencies of tastes and temperament as exist in your profession—especially in America, where I believe it is your aim to first put your plan into execution? They not only come into the show world from as many different walks of life, but as each one makes his success, he at once holds himself as a sort of a superior being to those who have not as yet received the same amount of applause, guffaws, or money. They all receive different salaries, and those who receive less are jealous of those who receive more; those who have not made their hits look upon those who have as flukes." ...

[Editor's note: Vaudevillians did form a union, the Society of the White Rats. The author, describes the strategy planned by the White Rats and a strike.]

But if one man can control many Theatres and enlist the backing of millions of dollars of capital in the face of great opposition, why is it that many men cannot control a few Theatres when their independence and, in fact, their artistic salvation, depends on it, and when they are in a position to collectively produce the capital themselves?

But as a matter of fact, the stage people of America stand on much firmer ground than would seem even by the above statement. They have an organization of several thousand members, "The White Rats of America," with experienced theatrical men at the helm, capable of the management of theatrical enterprises... It is now in a position to co-operate with the citizens of any city in the United States in the control and management of Vaudeville Theatres, and it is very well known that in nearly every city in America there are men who would be anxious to invest in such profitable enterprises were they not afraid of the power of Vaudeville monopoly, or if they could be assured of not being handicapped in the securing of talent. And this assurance The White Rats of America are now in a position to give, as well as to prove the practicability of theatrical cooperation. The plan of which is simple in the extreme. The members of the White Rats by paying into their own accounts a certain percentage of their earnings, which they have heretofore paid for booking purposes ... would produce a constantly growing fund to be used in the purchase of 51 per cent of the shares of Theatres in different cities. This majority of shares in each enterprise would forever preclude the possibility of Vaudeville monopoly and,

by giving the actors control over their own Theatres, prevent the merging of opposite interests which invariably tend to threaten their salaries and advancement; and as the membership of the White Rats comprise or control nearly all the leading acts on the Vaudeville stage in the United States and Europe..., they are in a position to guarantee those managers and citizens with whom they co-operate a supply of talent at least equal to that which any opposition can possibly secure. It is not intended that the organization would run the Theatres, they would merely control them for the purpose of their own protection.... Nothing can stand against the direct management of owners. We are only pioneers whose duty is to start the movement, leaving our successors its full and free development as human society advances....And until this plan is consummated and in working effect no great progress can be made. And as the suggestion does not come from the managers, it is up to the Actors. It is their move. The situation is in their hands. All they need is the courage of enterprise. . . .

One morning, early in May, 1900, the Vaudeville Artists of the United States awoke and read in the papers that all the principal Managers of Variety Theatres were going to meet and form a gigantic Vaudeville trust, or syndicate, and that the powers of this syndicate were only going to invite one certain favorite Manager of each City outside of Greater New York to join their enterprise: that all others would be tabooed, and that as, therefore, there would be but one Theatre in every town where the Vaudevillian could secure an engagement, the said Vaudevillian's salary would be much reduced. They also read in these papers that there were too many actors on the stage, and that the actor received too much salary anyway; and that the supply of Vaudevillians was greater than the demand, so the unfit would have to be weeded out, and go back to the mines or the woods. Who were the unfit? The Managers did not say. . . .

[following a union meeting the next day, Mr. Albee, manager of Keith's Union Square Theater, confronted Dromio, leader of the White Rats]

...“It is reported,” says E.F. Albee, “that your members are going on a strike this afternoon at the Union Square Theatre.”

“Not so, Mr. Albee,” says Chief Dromio. “Our members [of the White Rats union] are worried so greatly over certain existing conditions that they are liable to fall ill, even this afternoon, and in other cities besides New York, as, for instance, Boston, Providence, and Philadelphia. But as these conditions which worry them so can be easily adjusted to suit them, they will most likely all get well at once, upon being apprised of said alteration. ...

And on the following day—Lincoln's Birthday (Oh! Most appropriate hour to strike for freedom!), Febrary [sic] 22, 1901, there were no White Rats appearing on any of the programmes given in any of the principal Vaudeville Theatres in the East or Middle West... The managers published what they thought to be their side, and also the amount of salaries paid to leading stars, hoping to convince the public that they were overpaid. They had no argument, because it was apparent to everyone that ninety-five cents was not one dollar. and the next day the New York press was teeming with accounts of the White Rats' Victory, distinctly stating that the managers had promised to abolish the commissions. *The Evening Journal* had one page, with just three words on it: “WHITE RATS WIN.”

Dromio...summed up the situation...: “We have won the battle. Victory is ours...The Society [of White Rats] will do all within its power to help you keep what it has won for you; but it can do nothing if you *secretly give back as individuals that which you have strived so hard to win collectively*. You understand how it is; we have won these commissions and that means that you are privileged to insist upon a neutral contract with each manager as an individual, and not book through the offices of his association. You have won as a society, but you have not won as individuals.”

Text excerpted by Andrea Ringer, Department of History, Tennessee State University.

From: George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909): 21-25, 63, 68,134-135, 155, 160-161.