

# Paramount Center Project

## Emerson College Theatre District Rehabilitation Project

Washington Street, Boston, Mass.

2006-2010

### Permanent Lobby Exhibition

## Boston Theatre History ... including Boston Vaudeville History

R.W. Bacon ~ Vaudeville History Consultant

In 2005 Emerson College announced its plan to renovate the Paramount Theatre on Washington Street in Boston's theatre district, an \$80 million project to include a 590-seat main theatre, a black-box theatre, film screening room, sound stage, rehearsal rooms, classrooms, faculty offices, and dormitory housing for 262 students. All of this massive redevelopment (180,000 square feet!) would spread across the original footprint of several earlier iconic theatres that were the cradle of the vaudeville entertainment genre in the 1880s.

Plans included exhibit panels throughout the center's public spaces to interpret the arc of Boston's theatre history – a permanent exhibition to also include the history of vaudeville, from its birth at the 80-chair dime museum of B.F. Keith, to the artistic and business triumph at the theatrical palaces of the 1920s. Vaudeville historian and interpreter R.W. Bacon was engaged as consultant on interpretation of this topic. In addition, project curators elected to feature a selection of vintage photos and ephemera from the Vaudeville Retrospective Collection.

When the Paramount Theatre opened in 1932 – on the footprint of Keith's 1882 dime museum – it was as a single-screen 1700-seat movie theatre with a stage only 10-feet deep. Its neighbors to the north were the Bijou Theatre (1882, 1021 seats), B.F. Keith's New

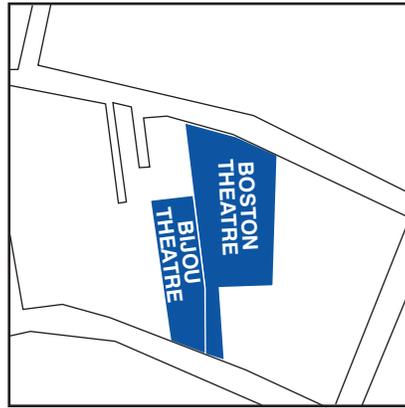
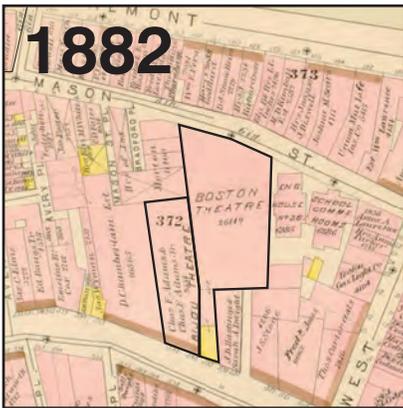
Theatre (1894, 1800 seats), the Keith Memorial Theatre (1928, 2907 seats, now known as the Opera House), and the Modern Theatre (1914, 800 seats). The Paramount closed in 1976, but its marquee was restored in 2002 by the developers of the adjacent Ritz-Carlton Towers.

As the complicated construction project progressed towards completion, the generous linear footage originally devoted to the interpretive panels on Boston theatre history kept shrinking. Nevertheless, the resulting permanent exhibition in the highly-visible public spaces of the new performing arts center is the next-best-thing to an actual museum of Boston theatre ... and vaudeville.

In the aftermath of completion, the Paramount Center project was honored with the Boston Society of Architects 2010 Honor Award for Design Excellence, the American Institute of Architects New England Chapter 2010 Design Award, the Boston Preservation Alliance's 2010 Preservation Achievement Award, and the 2011 Architecture Merit Award of the U.S. Institute for Theatre Technology.

The pages that follow provide historical context, and show photos of construction progress, the exhibition panels, scenes from the 2010 grand opening, and a selection of images from the Vaudeville Retrospective Collection. – **R.W. Bacon**

**Boston's Washington St. Theatres (... from Avery St. north to West St.)**



**Keith's Dime Museum (1883)**  
 (a.k.a. Gayety Hall Museum, New York Dime Museum, Keith & Batcheller's Mammoth Museum ... etc.)  
 Capacity: 123 ..... 565-567 Washington St.

**Paramount Theatre (1932)**  
 Capacity: 1700 ..... 549-559 Washington St.

**B.F. Keith's New Theatre (1894)**  
 (a.k.a. Apollo, Lyric, Normandie, Laff-Movie, Art-Movie)  
 Capacity: 1800 ..... 547 Washington St.

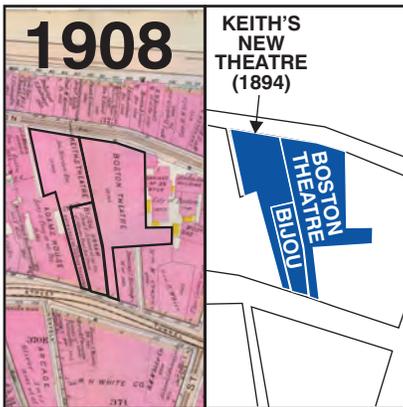
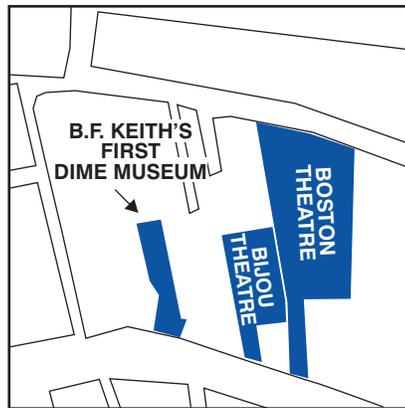
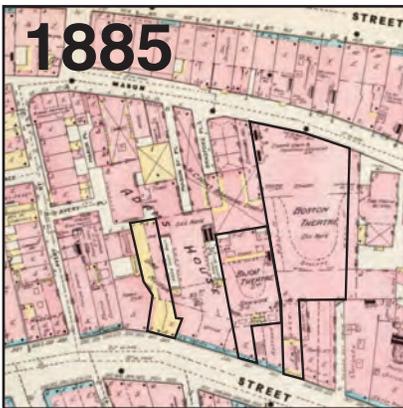
**Bijou Theatre (1882)**  
 (a.k.a. Lion-1836, Melodeon-1840, Gaiety-1878)  
 Capacity: 1021 ..... 545 Washington St.

**Boston Theatre (1854)**  
 (a.k.a. Academy of Music)  
 Capacity: 3140 ..... 539 Washington St.

*... closed in 1925, razed, and replaced in 1928 by ...*

**B.F. Keith Memorial Theatre (1928)**  
 (a.k.a. RKO-Keith, Savoy, Opera House)  
 Capacity: 2907 ..... 539 Washington St.

**Modern Theatre (1914)**  
 (a.k.a. Mayflower)  
 Capacity: 800 ..... 523-525 Washington St.



**1908 Postcard View ...**  
 (Washington St., looking south)

**Adams House (Hotel c. 1850)**  
**Adams House Annex (c. 1860)**

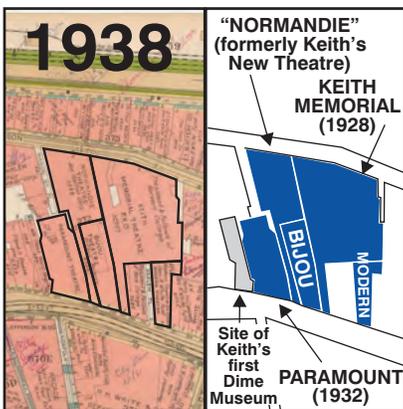
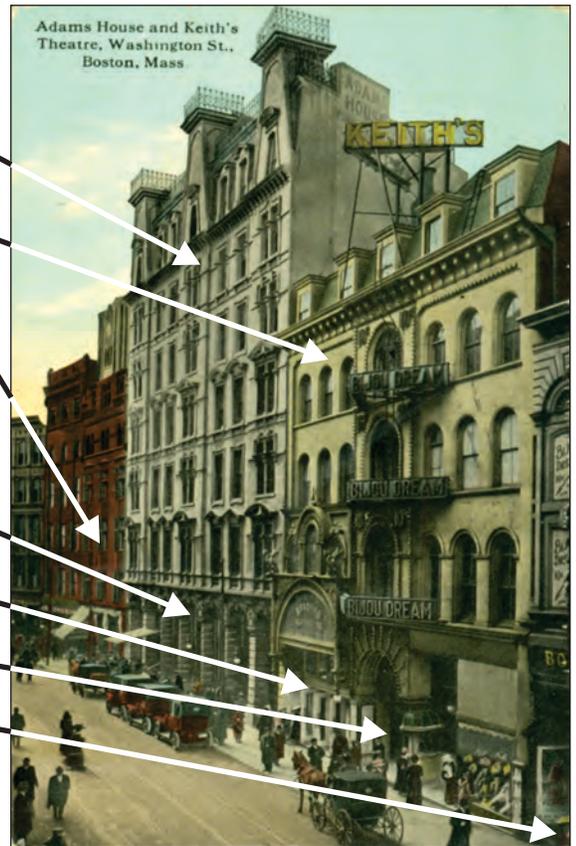
**First location of Keith's Dime Museum (1883)**  
 (... later in Adams House Annex at 543-547 Washington St., in stores on either side of the Bijou entrance.)

**Future location of Paramount Theatre (1932)**

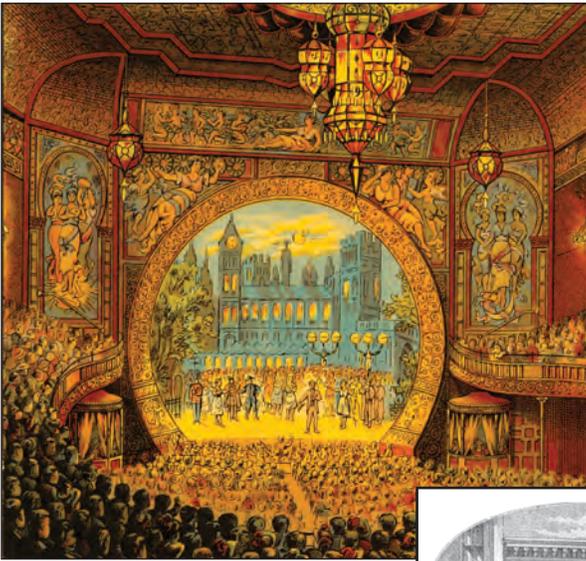
**Entrance to B.F. Keith's New Theatre (1894)**

**Entrance to Bijou Theatre (1882)**

**To come in the future, just out of view to the north:**  
**Keith Memorial Theatre (1928)**  
**Modern Theatre (1914)**



**Boston's Washington St. Theatres (... from Avery St. north to West St.)**



**Bijou Theatre, 1883. (Built as the Lion Theatre in 1836.)**

**1914 view of the Adams House (theatrical hotel), Keith's New Theatre, & the Bijou Theatre, Washington St., Boston, Mass.**

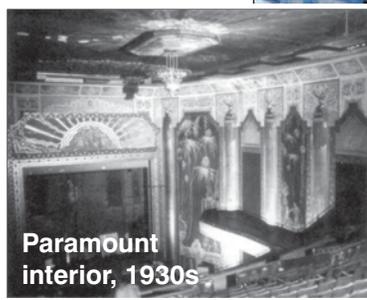


**Boston Theatre, 1886. (Built in 1854; later gutted and rebuilt as the Keith Memorial Theatre in 1928.)**

**The Modern Theatre (1914)**



**Paramount Theatre (1932 facade & marquee) before reconstruction**



**Paramount interior, 1930s**



**Modern Theatre interior, c. 1920**



## The Paramount Center – Early phase of construction, 2008



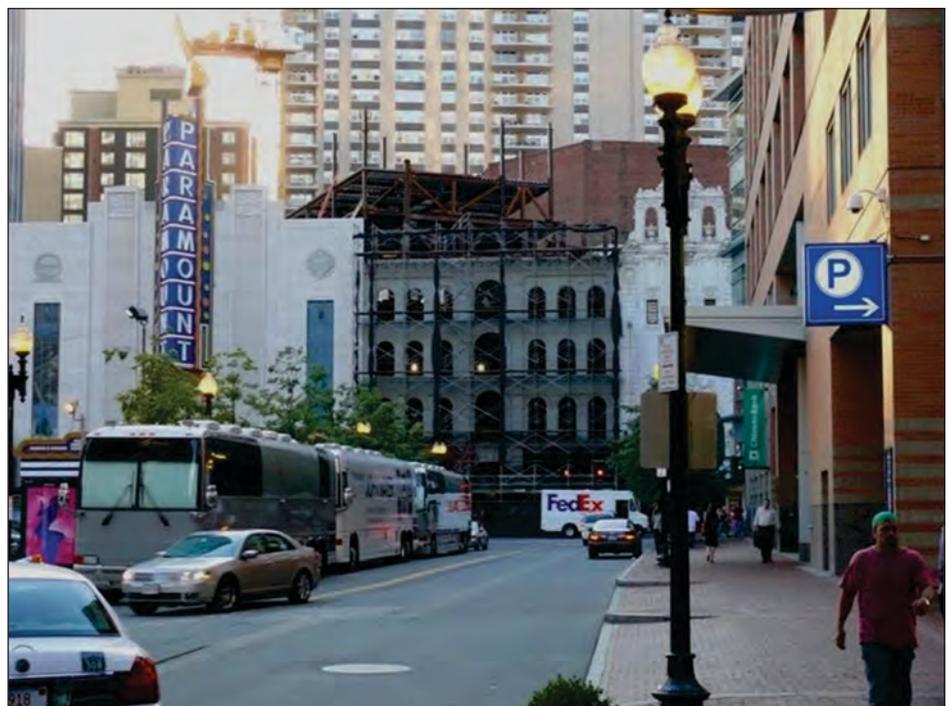
Above, the former Bijou and Keith's New Theatre, both gutted and reduced to the Washington St. facade only.



Above, the former 1700-seat Paramount movie palace is a hollow shell. Now it's a 600-seat proscenium theatre.

At right is a front view of Emerson College's new Paramount Center on Washington St. The facade and marquee of the Paramount were restored several years ago by the developers of the Ritz Towers. Just to the right, scaffolding surrounds the former Bijou and Keith's New Theatre, the cradle of Boston's vaudeville history in the 1880s.

The ornate white facade to the right is the former Keith Memorial Theatre, built in 1928. It is now known as the Opera House. Just out of view to the right is the Modern Theatre (1914), which is being restored and repurposed by Suffolk University.



# PARAMOUNT CENTER PROJECT, BOSTON

## An \$80 Million Redevelopment for Boston's Birthplace of Vaudeville

The 178,000 sq. ft. project by Emerson College encompasses multiple historic theatre spaces, from the 1836 Lion Theatre, through the B.F. Keith vaudeville empire, to the 1932 art-deco movie palace, the Paramount Theatre.

- 590-seat theatre
- Screening room
- Black-box theatre
- Soundstage
- Rehearsal spaces
- Classrooms/offices
- Dormitory space
- Restaurant and ...
- A permanent theatre history exhibition

### Scenes from the VIP Opening Gala, March 18, 2010

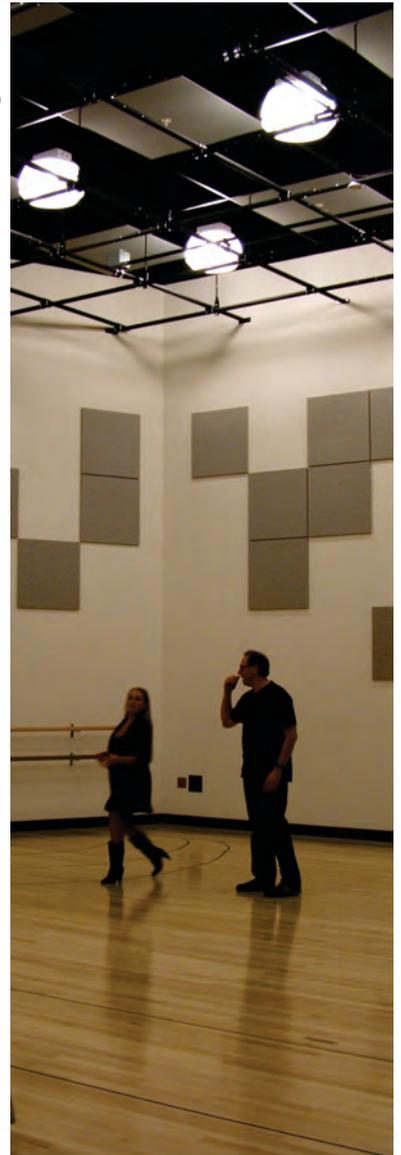




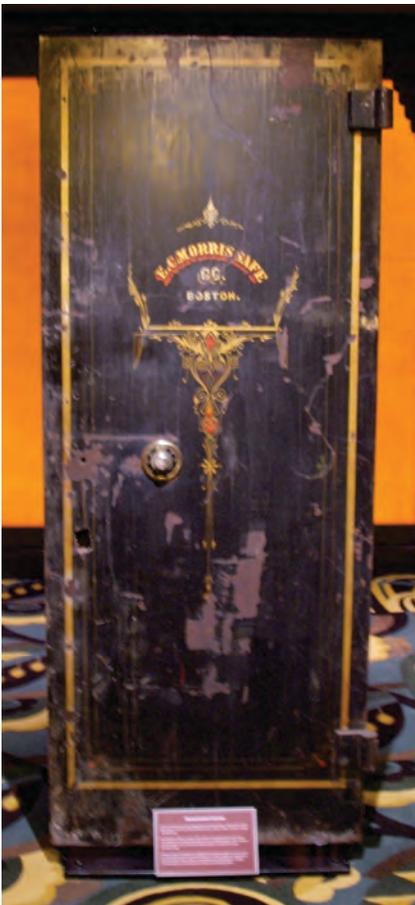
Balcony-level lobby ...  
before the crowds!

Dance studio

Backdrop drape in  
Bijou Theatre motif



A view down  
the winding stairway



Door to  
B.F. Keith's  
safe!





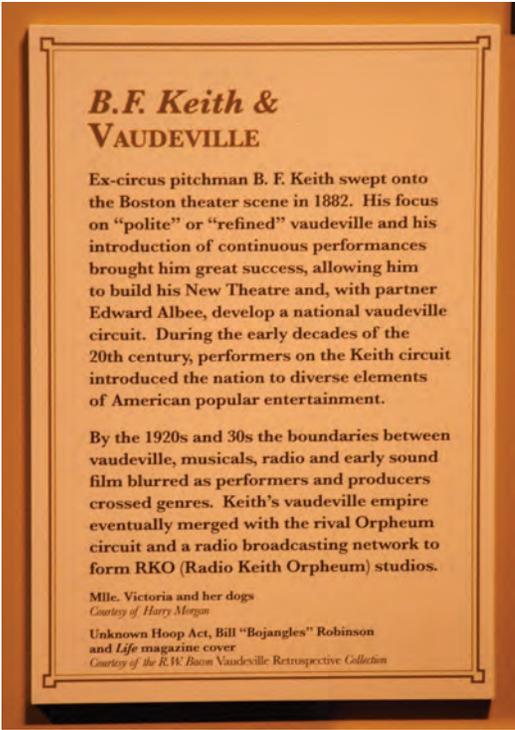
Display panels of this permanent exhibition trace the entire arc of Boston's theatre history – the closest we may get to a Boston theatre or vaudeville museum.





These photos don't do the display panels justice. See them for yourself at the Paramount Center for the full effect of their size and three-dimensional quality.





Between conception and completion, the exhibition shrank considerably. Reams of vaudeville interpretation were reduced to just a few panels.

At right, the modest credit panel.

The graphic below is about 30 feet wide and 20 feet high. An information panel with captions is on an elevated walkway.



## In Appreciation

*Curators:*  
**Christina Zamon, Hank Zappala and Robert Fleming, Emerson College**

*Exhibition Design & Installation:*  
**Will Twombly, Spokeshave Design**

*Graphic Design:*  
**Sylvie Laborde, SL Design**

*Graphic Production:*  
**Dale Parker, Advanced Imaging**

*Exhibition Development:*  
**Cynthia Robinson**

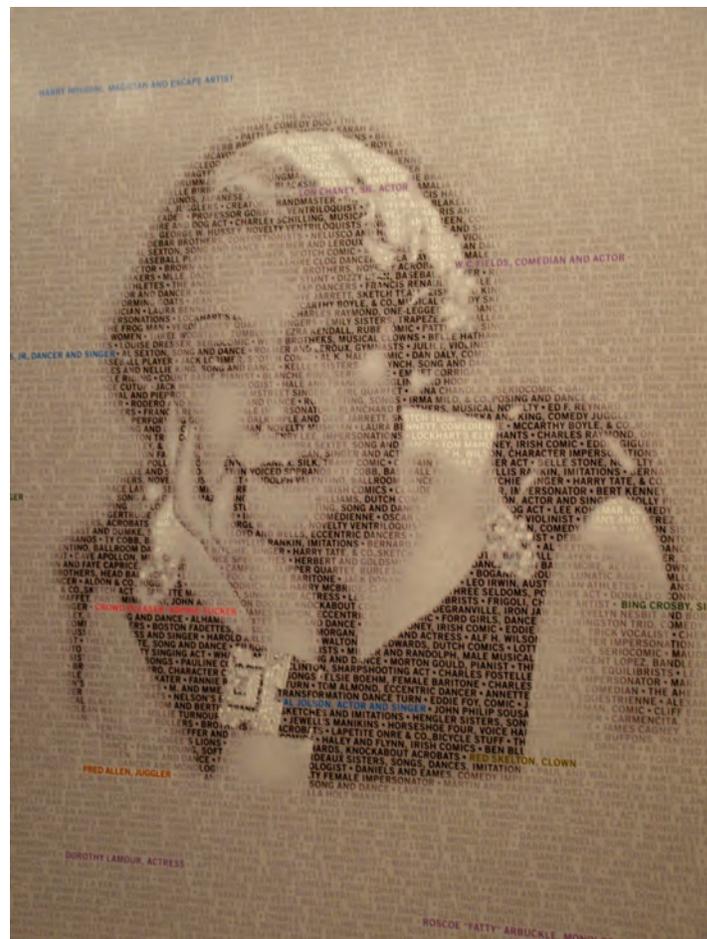
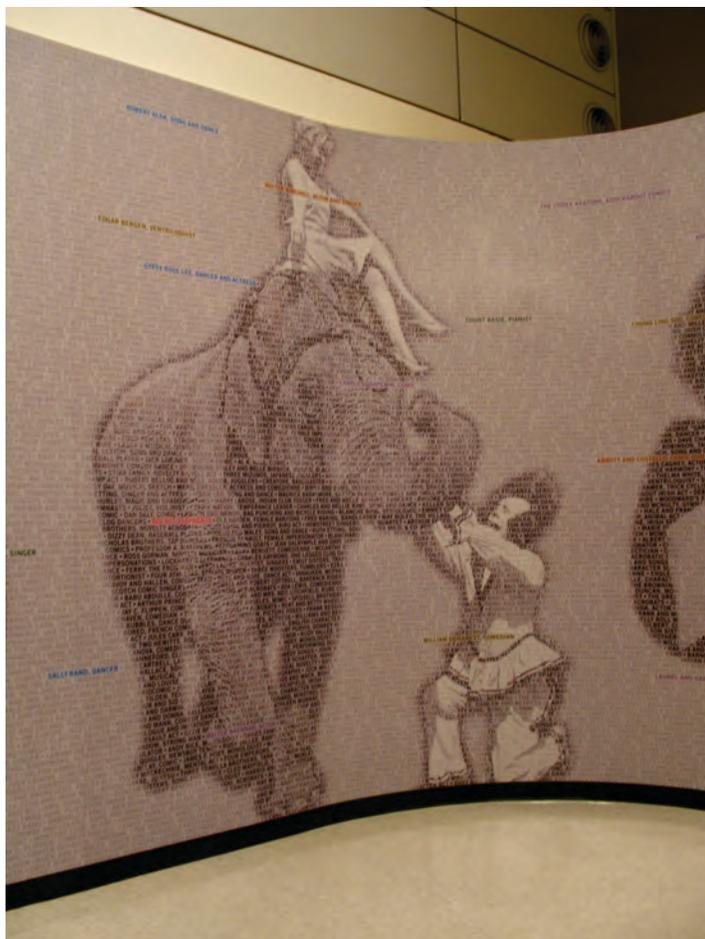
*Photo Research:*  
**Debby Paddock**

*Vaudeville Consultant:*  
**Reginald W. Bacon**

*Installation Assistants:*  
**Juliet Cocca and Emily Twombly**

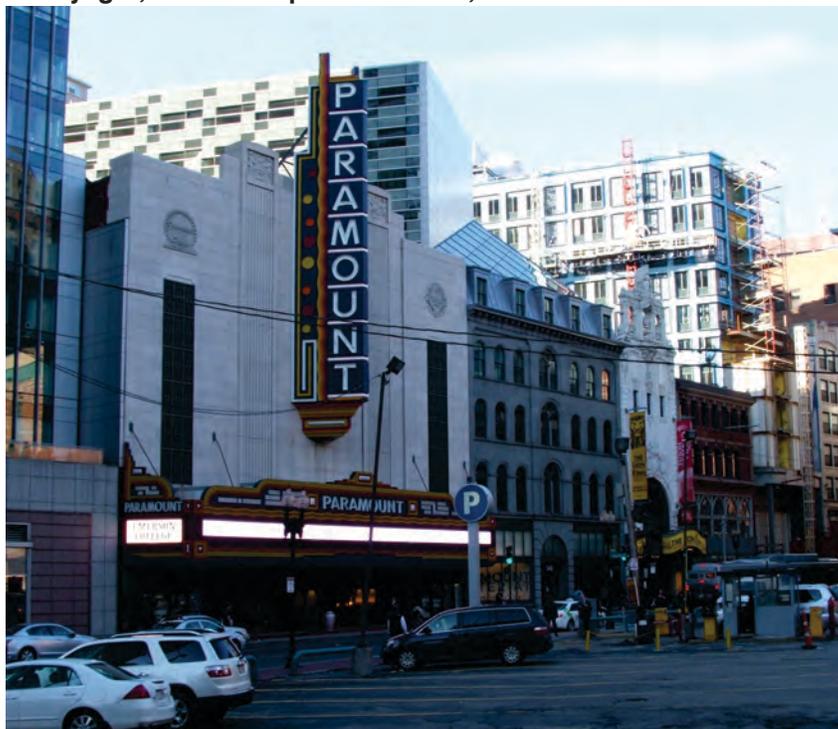
*Thanks to:*  
**El and Helen Schaffer Foundation**  
 for their generous support.





Above are just two sections of the long, curved “wall of names” – performer famous and forgotten who at some point in their career performed within the footprint of the Paramount Center.

Below is the illuminated Bijou/Keith’s facade. In daylight, the dorm space is visible, & renovations at the Modern.





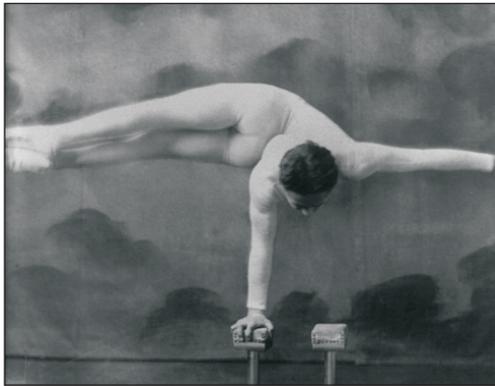
The Valdares



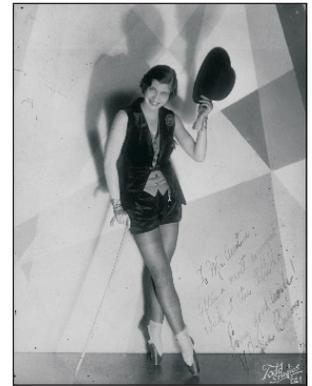
H.M. Lorette (1876-1958)



Fred Bacon (1882-1958)



Joseph Spah ("Ben Dova")



Virginia Bacon (b. 1906)



Noble Sissle & Eubie Blake

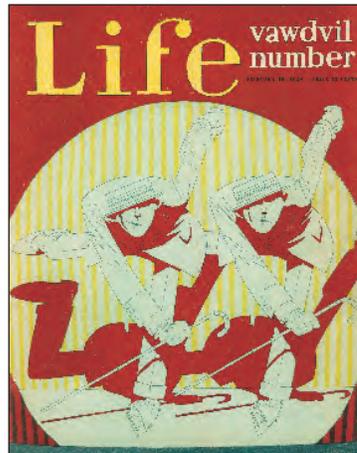
*A selection  
of images  
chosen from  
the  
Vaudeville  
Retrospective  
Collection*



Bill Robinson



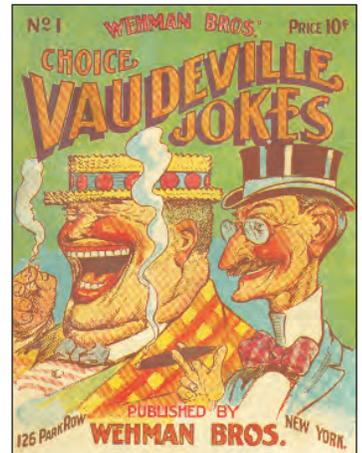
Anonymous Big Sax Man



Life Magazine Cover, 2/16/1928



"Buck & Bubbles"



Choice Vaudeville Jokes, 1907