

# *Entertainers or Athletes?*

## Professional Strongwomen, Vaudeville and the Early-Twentieth-Century Fascination With Female Strength

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By 1900, more than two thousand theatres, scattered throughout the United States and Canada, played nothing but vaudeville. According to turn-of-the-century booking agent Joseph Schenck, vaudeville outstripped all other forms of entertainment in popularity. "Ten people attend a vaudeville show," he reported, "for every one who patronizes other forms of entertainment." In New York City alone, half a million people purchased tickets to vaudeville performances each week. Unlike late-Victorian capital "T" Theater, Vaudeville was low-brow, not high-brow. Vaudeville taught few moral lessons and did not overtly try to educate its audiences. Its goals were entertainment, humor, and fantasy; and it served as an escape from lives increasingly benumbed by industrial and urban forces.

Nonetheless, the historian Albert McLean has argued that vaudeville - like the circuses that preceded it - served an important "educational" function in turn-of-the-century America. It served, he claimed, as a "Means of assimilation and crystallization of very important and historically significant value judgements upon life in an expanding industrial democracy." According to McLean vaudeville was a vehicle for perpetuating the virtues of pioneer America. It glorified: independence and individualism; freedom from cultural restraints and taboos; and, physical strength and courage.

The emergence of a considerable number of "professional strongwomen" in turn-of-the-century vaudeville suggests that McLean's theories are not far off the mark. Although a few strongmen and strongwomen had appeared in European circuses since the middle of the eighteenth century, the convergence of the late nineteenth-century rise of vaudeville, the arrival of thousands of European immigrants, and the 1890s physical culture movement, resulted in *a fin de siecle* enthusiasm for strength entertainers of both sexes. The strongwomen who took to the boards in this era varied considerably in style, strength, and talent. Some "strongwomen," like Belle Gordon, simply swung Indian clubs and dazzled audiences with their endurance, quickness, and finesse. Other "strongwomen," like Katie Sandwina - the most famous strongwoman of the early twentieth century - presented acts based on true strength. Taken as a whole, however, these female strength entertainers embodied the virtues articulated by McLean: independence, freedom from cultural restraints, and physical strength and courage. As William Inglis wrote of Katie Sandwina in *Harper's Weekly* in 1911:

From the east of the Garden came an athlete all in white...[with] as pretty a face, as sweet a smile and as fine a head of silky brown curls as a man could ask to see...but she had the muscles of Thor. Whew! Those shoulders! And the arms on her - a pair of thick, white, graceful, rippling pythons! She had the back of a Hackenschmidt!

...A condition not a theory confronts us. The New Woman is not threatening; she is here. She is modestly billed as Katie Sandwina, Europe's Queen of Strength, Beauty and Dexterity. She'll be Queen of America too..."

Using Katie Sandwina's scrapbooks, the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection and the theories of Albert McLean and other social historians, this paper explores the cultural significance of the turn-of-the-century strongwoman. It examines the relevance of the ethnicity of the entertainers and their audience; the turn-of-the-century's fascination with physical strength; and the evolution of a new relationship which evolved between strength, femininity, and personal independence.