

# DIRECTIONS FOR TEACHERS

## LISTENING SECTION

### COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH

Tuesday, January 25, 2005—9:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., only

**BE SURE THAT THE LISTENING SECTION IS ADMINISTERED TO EVERY STUDENT.**

- 1 Before the start of the examination period, say:

**Do not open the examination booklet until you are instructed to do so.**

- 2 Distribute one examination booklet and one essay booklet to each student.

- 3 After each student has received an examination booklet and an essay booklet, say:

**Tear off the answer sheet, which is the last page of the examination booklet, and fill in its heading. Now circle “Session One” and fill in the heading on each page of your essay booklet.**

- 4 After the students have filled in all headings on their answer sheets and essay booklets, say:

Look at page 2 of your examination booklet and follow along while I read the **Overview** and **The Situation**.

**Overview:**

For this part of the test, you will listen to an account about vaudeville, a type of theatrical entertainment popular in the late 1890s and early 1900s, answer some multiple-choice questions, and write a response based on the situation described below. You will hear the account twice. You may take notes on the next page anytime you wish during the readings.

**The Situation:**

Your English class is studying the history of theatre in the United States. For your project, you have decided to write a report about the factors that influenced the development of vaudeville in New York City. In preparation for writing your report, listen to an account by Robert W. Snyder. Then use relevant information from the account to write your report.

Now I will read the passage aloud to you for the first time.

- 5 Now read the passage aloud, including the attribution at the end. Read with appropriate expression, but without added comment.

## Listening Passage

Vaudeville, like most successful things, was based on a simple idea: stage shows with something for everyone. But in a city with the enormous diversity of New York, that was never a simple proposition. Each show had to have enough rough fun for workingmen, enough glamour for middle-class women, and enough old-country sentiment for immigrants far from home. A complete bill was a synchronized succession of daredevils, comics, tearjerkers, and crooners. The combination made vaudeville the most widely enjoyed form of turn-of-the-century theatre.

First and foremost, vaudeville was a business. The entrepreneurs who put the shows together were out to make money. But in New York City, they worked in a dynamic and complex metropolis that gave their creations consequences they never anticipated.

To succeed, vaudeville had to have as many voices as the city where it thrived. They swelled together in a chorus that was rarely in unison, sometimes in harmony, and always as loud, brassy, and quintessentially New York as the sound of a subway train roaring into Times Square. Vaudeville was slapstick clowns and devilish comedians who challenged old codes of propriety and gentility. It was sentimental songs about Mother and the pain of unrequited love. It was elaborately tuneful productions that heralded the beginning of American musical theatre. It was the children of slaves and immigrants, whose singing, dancing, and music gave a new, multicultural meaning to American identity. And there were sour notes: the grasping entrepreneurs who squeezed their money out of performers' paychecks, the frustrations of artists who aimed for stardom but fell short, and the ugly racial stereotypes that distorted the portrayal of black Americans.

Yet the symphonic sound of New York vaudeville was shaped by more than its metropolitan environment. It was also formed by the larger times and society.

The turn of the century marked a watershed in the history of American popular culture, which is defined by its broad audience. Its expressions—songs, stories, comedy, whatever—are accessible to people in all segments of society. But when vaudeville appeared, the conditions under which popular culture was produced and enjoyed were changing.

From colonial days to the middle nineteenth century, American popular culture was deeply influenced by custom, tradition, and public festivity. It was usually rooted in a place, like the Bowery of New York City, with its saloons and cheap theatres. Local likes and dislikes exercised a profound influence over the relationship between artists and audiences, so much so that audiences sometimes seemed like coproducers of the show.

In the twentieth century, popular culture came to be defined by electronic mass media—film, radio, recordings, and television. A centralized entertainment business, which disseminated standardized products from coast to coast, undermined the local bases of culture. The rowdy spirit of the Bowery became a portable, marketable commodity. Audiences, which had once so intensely interacted with live performers, eventually became consumers of electronic sounds and images—often in the privacy of their homes.

Vaudeville arose in the middle of this transition and helped it along. The vaudeville theatre's polyphony was partly caused by the contrast between old and new popular culture. Vaudeville shows had bounce, immediacy, and energy, but the industry that presented them was bureaucratic and hierarchical. They offered the hilarity of an old-fashioned carnival and the flickering screen images of the first motion pictures. They paid close attention to local audiences, but knit them into a modern mass constituency. They featured blackface minstrels straight out of Jacksonian America and modern Jewish comedians from the Lower East Side.

The genius of such shows lay in their ability to speak to a complex and infinitely varied audience. By the 1890s, immigration and industrialization had made New Yorkers a people

of divergent nationalities, religions, races, and classes—all of them wrestling, it seemed, with the definition of the proper roles for men and women. New Yorkers seemed to have as many differences as similarities.

In such a city, a form of theatre that offered something for everyone was bound to present people with the unexpected. When New Yorkers entered a vaudeville theatre, they entered an arena for communications between otherwise separate people. There they encountered strangers and novelties and tried on new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Influences flowed back and forth in the kind of reciprocal cultural exchange that scholars have called “circularity.”

All who participated were transformed. Middle-class women experimented with alternatives to the chafing restraints of Victorianism when they watched the cyclonic singing and dancing of Eva Tanguay. Working people relieved factory monotony with the hilarity and vitality of Eddie Cantor. Businessmen escaped from office stress with sketches like “Blackmail,” a short vaudeville play that crackled with intrigue. Irish-Americans, so recently the outcasts of the city, celebrated their ascendancy when Maggie Cline roared out the boxing ballad “Throw Him Down, McCloskey.” Homesick Jews found a hymn to Mom and a new American ethnic identity when Sophie Tucker sang “My Yiddisha Mama.” White Americans discovered the musical artistry of black Americans, which was already transforming popular music with the buoyant, syncopated strains of ragtime.

Culture is a many-sided conversation, and nowhere in turn-of-the-century America were the voices more complex, contradictory, and concentrated than in vaudeville. In the vaudeville theatre, New Yorkers found celebration and sentiment, freedom and confinement, abundance and exploitation, intimacy and bureaucracy, glitter and meanness: the voice of the city.

— from *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*, 1989

6 After reading the passage aloud once, say:

You may take a few minutes to look over **The Situation** and your notes.  
(Pause) Now I will read the passage aloud a second time.

7 Read the passage a second time.

8 After the second reading, say:

Now turn to page 4 of your examination booklet, read the directions, and answer the multiple-choice questions. Be sure to follow all the directions given in your examination booklet and your essay booklet. You may now begin.

