Historica Canada Education Portal

Ruby Keeler

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Ruby Keeler biography from *The Canadians* series. Keeler was an actor and performer who made her film debut in *42nd Street,* which kicked off a string a musical hits in the 1930's starring Keeler.

Aims

In a variety of creative and role-playing exercises, students will examine Keeler's contributions to the art world, and reflect on the times in which she lived.

Background

Ruby Keeler was born on August 25, 1910 in Halifax, NS and immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was three.

East Side, New York City became her home, where she attended Catholic school. Taking part in 'drill' class, she learned the basics of rhythmic exercise. Her formal dance education was minimal but in 1923 she landed her first real job in George Cohan's *The Rise of Rosie*

O'Reilly.

Her career continued by tapping, smiling, and hoofing through speakeasies, saloons, and nightclubs. Finally on Broadway she performed in four musical comedies and attained star status in Florenz Ziegfield's production of *Show Girl* (1929).

The Ziegfield connection sent her to Hollywood and while there she performed in her first two-minute (shortie) film. During this trip she met her first husband Al Jolson. In Warner Brothers *42nd Street* she made her movie debut. The combination of refined film making equipment, Busby Berkeley's dance routines, a good plot, and Ruby as catalyst - made film history, kicking off an era of musical hits starring Keeler and Dick Powell.

After her divorce from Jolson, she married again in 1941 and retired from show business. By the 1950's the requests for television appearances and special spots in stage shows began. The mid 60's fad of sentimental nostalgia led to a Berkeley film festival in the Gallery of Modern Art in New York where the popular cultural movement was based on "the queen of satire."

In 1971 Ruby starred as "Sue" in *No, no, Nanette* which opened to rave reviews. Critics agreed that Ruby made the show work.

Ruby's later years were spent enjoying her family, golf, and swimming. She had four children with her second husband John Lowe, who died in 1969. One adopted son from her first marriage, whom Al had named "Sonny Boy," later changed his name to Peter.

Ruby passed away on February 28, 1993 in her California home after a

long battle with cancer.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

How many movie stars and entertainers born in Canada but made famous in the U.S. can you name? Would Ruby Keeler, be on your list along with Michael J. Fox, John Candy, William Shatner, Jim Carrey and Mary Pickford? She should be. Ruby Keeler was born in Nova Scotia and immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was three. Should Ruby be recognized as a famous Canadian? This is just one theme for your study of this famous entertainer.

1. Try a formally structured debate with this resolution, 'Be it resolved that Ruby Keeler, despite the fact that she was a famous Hollywood and Broadway star, deserves to be recognized as a great Canadian for her work as an outstanding dancer and actress who drew upon personal experiences.'

2. Create a timeline marking Ruby Keeler's path to stardom including 10-15 key events or developments in her life starting from her birth in 1910 to her death in 1992.

In groups, have students select one of the events from the timeline. Depending on the event, have students create a poster, write a playbill, critique, poem, or review that further investigates this event.

3. If you could choose 5 sentences to write a short biography about Ruby Keeler each beginning with "*Ruby Keeler was.....*," what would they be? Share these responses with the class and construct a master list on chart paper for reference and discussion.

4. What did Ruby Keeler contribute to the art world? How was her style unique? Brainstorm these ideas as a class and write them on chart paper for reference and discussion.

5. In groups create a radio commercial or jingle for either a Broadway production or a Hollywood movie starring Ruby Keeler. Include the producer, director, the co-stars, and the theatre and date where it will be premiering.

6. Assume before Ruby Keeler dies her friends and family plan a, *Ruby Keeler - This is Your Life* television special. The teacher can create the parameters of what exactly this should entail. It could be a mock television setting or if the resources are available, students could videotape it.

Roles to be played:
- Ruby Keeler
- John Homer Lowe
- her children
- Al Jolson
- Buzby Berkly
- Jimmy Cagney
- Johnny Costello
- Jack Blue
- Andrea Lay Smith
- Ralph Keeler

- Nellie Keeler

Each actor is required to prepare a 2-3 minute presentation or speech to be made to Ms. Keeler. Be sure to draw upon the special effect she had on each of their lives. The rest of the class should work on the set of *This is Your Life.*

Select a student director to organize the presentation. This student can start and stop the presentation when necessary.

Select a student to play the part of the producer to aid the director and actors in organization and any outside research that needs to be done.

Some students should take on the role of production assistants to prepare cue cards for the actors to follow.

Other students can be the prop crew to gather any props needed for the speeches (i.e., playbills, reviews, wedding invitations, divorce papers, photographs or any other paraphernalia).

Have a costume crew gather costume pieces to represent the era in which the guest stars were alive - hats or scarves would work well.

Allow time for the students to gather any additional resources, research which they need, and to create and collect props and costumes. If you are going to videotape the show you will need a camera crew. Also you may need some time for a few rehearsals. Good luck!

Individual Projects

7. Discuss the world of speakeasies and saloons in New York in the

1920's. How did these influences affect Canada during the "roaring twenties"? Make a list of the similarities and differences between New York in the U.S. and Toronto or Montréal in Canada.

8. When did Ruby Keeler's thoughts begin to wander back to Halifax? What factors made her long for her childhood innocence? Write a letter as Ruby Keeler to your parents or a friend explaining how you feel about Halifax and Canada.

9. Write an article for the entertainment section of a newspaper telling Canadians about the return of the 'Queen of Nostalgia' in 1970. Include why she decided to make a comeback.

10. Create a journal entry as Ruby Keeler might have written one in 1989. What would be important to include in this particular entry? The date is very significant. How do you think she would have felt at the end of her life? What legacies and lessons would she leave for her own children and her many fans?

Resources

Ruby Keeler Worksheet

Ruby Keeler - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Marlow-Trump, Nancy. *Ruby Keeler: a photographic biography.* McFarland, Jefferson, N. C., 1998.