



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Leigh Rollin Whipper papers

1861-1963

Sc MG 47

Processed by Leslie Harrison.

Summary

Creator: Whipper, Leigh R. (Leigh Rollin), 1877-1975

Title: Leigh Rollin Whipper papers

Date: 1861-1963

Source: SCM 76-13, SCM 77-32, SCM 77-37, SCM 77-38, SCM 77-61

Abstract: Correspondence, plays, poems, sketches, and song lyrics by Whipper and others, including a musical comedy by Whipper and Porter Grainger entitled "We's Risin': A Story of the Simple Life in the Souls of Black Folk." Majority of the correspondence is congratulatory. Also, photographs and scrapbook of highlights in Whipper's career and programs, autograph books, and contracts pertaining to his career.

Physical Location: Sc Micro R-3807

Conditions Governing Access:

Researchers are restricted to microfilm copy.

Preferred citation: Leigh Rollin Whipper papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Leslie Harrison; machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Creator History

Leigh Whipper, one of America's best known character actors, was born in Charleston, South Carolina on October 29, 1876. He grew up in a nearby county where his father, Brigadier General William J. Whipper, was a circuit court judge and a member of two Constitutional Conventions during the

Reconstruction Era. His mother, Frances Rollins Whipper, and his sister, Ionia Whipper, were physicians.

Whipper graduated from Howard University Law School in 1895. However, instead of establishing a law practice, he immediately joined the theater. He never attended drama school, but learned his craft by observing the techniques of the prominent actors of his day. Whipper made his first stage appearance in *Georgia Minstrels*, then as an extra, sang *Old Black Joe* in a stock company of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Philadelphia in 1899.

Whipper's long and varied career spanned more than sixty-five years. His Broadway credits include *Stevedore*, in which he played Jim Veal; *In Abraham's Bosom*; *Three Men on a Horse*; *Of Mice and Men*, both on stage and screen; *Volpone*; *Set My People Free*; *Lysistrata* and *The Strike*. His film credits include *The Oxbow incident*, in which he played the role of the minister and for which he was nominated for an Academy Award; *Bahama Passage*; *Untamed Fury*, which he narrated; *The Harder They Fall*; *Marjorie Morningstar* and *The Young Don't Cry*. Leigh Whipper's most memorable performance was in the movie *Mission to Moscow* in which he portrayed the Emperor Haile Selassie. The Ethiopian government honored him for the scene in which Selassie delivers a speech before the League of Nations.

Whipper was a founding member of the Negro Actors Guild of America, Inc. and was closely associated with that organization all his life. He was the first black member of the Actors Equity Association and a member in good standing of the American Federation of Radio Artists and the Screen Actors Guild.

The vaudeville artist, comedian, lyric writer and actor was married to Lillian Miles and was the father of three children. He died in Harlem Hospital on July 26, 1975 at the age of ninetyeight.

Scope and Content Note

The Leigh Whipper Papers, 1861-1963, n.d. reflect his life as an actor, writer and celebrity. The collection consists of PERSONAL PAPERS, CORRESPONDENCE, CONTRACTS, WRITINGS AND TYPESCRIPTS, PLAYSSCRIPTS, PROGRAMS and a SCRAPBOOK.

Arrangement: Papers organized into seven series: I Personal Papers; II Correspondence; III Contracts; IV Writings and Typescripts; V Playscripts; VI Programs; and VII Scrapbook

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors
African American actors -- Societies, etc
African American entertainers
African American motion picture actors and actresses
African Americans in the performing arts
Revues -- United States -- History and criticism

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Appointment books
Photographic prints
Poems

Scrapbooks

Names

Whipper, Leigh R. (Leigh Rollin), 1877-1975

Grainger, Porter

Negro Actors Guild of America

Container List

b. 1 f. 1 r. 1 Personal Papers 1861-1943

Among the series are items belonging to Whipper, his father and his wife. Leigh Whipper's own material in this file includes three autograph books, 1928-1942, and membership cards, 1937-1943. The autograph books contain both signatures and notes from friends and colleagues, including Buckwheat, Sterling Hayden, Roland Hayes, Rose McClendon and Fred MacMurray. The membership cards pertain to some of the clubs and association to which Whipper belonged, such as the Colored Actors and Performers Association, Colored Thomas Jefferson Club, Inc., Rhythm Club and Turf Club. The papers of his father include a copy of a speech he delivered before the South Carolina House of Representatives, a description of his pension plan and deeds for land he had purchased. A Power of Attorney authorizing Lillian Whipper to dispose of the property of her deceased mother, is also included in this file.

Correspondence

The majority of the series is comprised of letters and telegrams of congratulations on the opening of shows and movies and in honor of the reception held for Whipper in 1961. Correspondents of note include William C. Handy, Jacob K. Javits, Louis J. Lefkowitz, Hattie McDaniel, Bayard Rustin and Ed Sullivan. This incoming correspondence has been arranged alphabetically by sender's last name and chronologically therein. The collection includes very little outgoing correspondence. There is a letter to his brother, telegrams to his wife and children and a letter to Eddie Cantor. The outgoing letters are arranged alphabetically by correspondent's name following the incoming correspondence.

b. 1 f. 2 r. 1 Incoming 1926-1961

b. 1 f. 3 r. 1 Outgoing 1930-1944

b. 1 f. 4 r. 1 Contracts 1940-1942

The series relates to Whipper's association with the Twentieth Century Music Corporation and his services as an actor in the play *Medicine Show*.

Writings and Typescripts

The series includes poems, sketches, and song lyrics by Whipper or written with the collaboration of others. There are also typescripts, articles, song lyrics and poems by other authors, some of whom are anonymous. Whipper's writings relate to his work in the theater and consist mostly of lyrics that have been used in plays in which he performed or lyrics written for commercial use. The writings of other artists pertain mostly to Whipper. Included is a thin volume of verse and reminiscence by Romeo L. Dougherty dedicated to Whipper. The typescripts reflect the breadth of the material with which Whipper was involved. Among the typescripts is one entitled *We's Risin': a story of the simple life in the souls of black folk*, a musical comedy by Porter Grainger and Leigh Whipper. Some of the typescripts have handwritten annotations. The Writings and Typescripts are arranged alphabetically by title within three files: those by Whipper, those by other authors and anonymous items.

b. 1 f. 5 r. 1 Whipper, Leigh 1927, n.d.

b. 1 f. 6 r. 1 Other Artists n.d.

b. 1 f. 7 r. 1 Anonymous n.d.

b. 1 f. 8 r. 1 Playscripts n.d.

The series consists of typescripts of the parts Whipper performed in different plays. Of particular note are the roles he played in Aristophane's *Lysistrata* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Programs

The series is divided into two categories: programs of Whipper's performances and programs relating to other artists. Each group of programs is arranged in chronological order.

b. 1 f. 9 r. 1 Whipper, Leigh 1924-1962

b. 1 f. 10 r. 1 Other Artists 1940-1963

b. 1 f. 11 r. 1 Scrapbook 1887-1938, n.d.

Contains clippings, programs and photographs that highlight Whipper's illustrious career. There are also photographs of Whipper's family.