



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

Guide to the

**Joan Ross Sorkin collection**

2003-2010 [bulk 2007]

Sc MG 869

**Summary**

**Creator:** Sorkin, Joan Ross

**Title:** Joan Ross Sorkin collection

**Date:** 2003-2010 [bulk 2007]

**Size:** 0.21 linear feet (1 box)

**Source:** Gift of Joan Ross Sorkin, March 2012.

**Abstract:** Joan Ross Sorkin is a playwright, opera librettist, musical theater bookwriter, lyricist, and screenwriter. Sorkin was born in New York City and attended the University of Rochester, as well as the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she studied history and politics. She went on to work as a research analyst in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, where she gained interest in race relations, a theme which has influenced several of her theatrical works. After earning a law degree and practicing law on Wall Street, Sorkin began writing plays and musical theater including the opera *Strange Fruit* and the play (mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story. Her plays, operas, musicals, and cabarets have been presented off-Broadway and at regional theaters, earning her national acclaim. Sorkin is currently a member of The Dramatist Guild, BMI Musical Theater Workshop, and New Vic Collaboratory. The Joan Ross Sorkin collection, 2003-2010, is comprised of materials documenting two of her works, the opera *Strange Fruit* and the play (mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story, which are based on race relations and events from American history. The collection contains libretti, a piano score, programs, press releases, and reviews pertaining to the two works.

**Preferred citation:** [Item], Joan Ross Sorkin collection, Sc MG 869, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

**Processing note:** Accessioned by Aileen Bloise, March 2013.

**Separated Materials:**

Transferred to the Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division: audio and moving image materials. For more information, please contact the division at [schomburgaudiovisual@nypl.org](mailto:schomburgaudiovisual@nypl.org) or 212-491-2270.

## Creator History

Joan Ross Sorkin is a playwright, opera librettist, musical theater bookwriter, lyricist, and screenwriter. Sorkin was born in New York City and attended the University of Rochester, as well as the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she studied history and politics. She went on to work as a research analyst in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, where she gained interest in race relations, a theme which has influenced several of her theatrical works. After earning a law degree and practicing law on Wall Street, Sorkin began writing plays and musical theater including the opera *Strange Fruit* and the play *(mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story*. Her plays, operas, musicals, and cabarets have been presented off-Broadway and at regional theaters, earning her national acclaim. Sorkin is currently a member of The Dramatist Guild, BMI Musical Theater Workshop, and New Vic Collaboratory.

## Scope and Content Note

The Joan Ross Sorkin collection, 2003-2010, is comprised of materials documenting two of her works, the opera *Strange Fruit* and the play *(mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story*, which are based on race relations and events from American history. The collection contains libretti, a piano score, programs, press releases, and reviews pertaining to the two works.

## Key Terms

### Subjects

African American screenwriters  
African American women dramatists  
African Americans -- Social conditions  
Authors, Black  
Librettists  
Racism -- United States

### Genre/Physical Characteristic

Librettos (documents for music)

### Names

Sorkin, Joan Ross

## Container List

### *Strange Fruit* 2005-2009

The opera is adapted from Lillian Smith's best-selling novel, *Strange Fruit*, whose title was made famous by Billie Holiday's song about lynching. Smith's book, published in 1944, was banned by booksellers in various locales around the country because of the story about a secret interracial love affair in Georgia in 1920. Sorkin's play depicts many of the emotions which affected both sides of the racial divide.

The set of materials documenting the opera, *Strange Fruit*, contains the libretto by Sorkin and the piano score (Kremer Music Publishing, 2005). There are programs from the performances at the New York City Opera, VOX (2003), the Long Leaf Opera Festival (2007), and The Harlem School of the Arts (2009). The press releases and reviews of the opera are also included; the bulk of the material is mainly about the performance at the Long Leaf Opera Festival.

- b. 1 f. 1 Libretto undated
- b. 1 f. 2 Piano score 2005
- b. 1 f. 3 Programs 2003-2009
- b. 1 f. 4 Reviews 2007-2009

### *(mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story* 2007-2010

The play is about Hattie McDaniel, the first African American to win an Academy Award, and her struggle with the controversial campaign waged by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against Black actresses portraying roles as domestic servants.

Sorkin's play won a Chicago Tribune Critics' Pick of the Festival award.

The materials documenting the one-woman play, *(mis)UNDERSTANDING MAMMY: The Hattie McDaniel Story*, consists of the libretto; programs from the Emerging Artists Theater Company (2007), Chicago Humanities Festival (2007), and the Tara in Texas II at The Jefferson Playhouse (2010); and reviews.

- b. 1 f. 5 Libretto 2007
- b. 1 f. 6 Programs 2007-2010
- b. 1 f. 7 Reviews and interview 2007