



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

Guide to the

Oscar Micheaux papers

1871 - 1951 [bulk 1936 - 1951]

Sc MG 972

Processed by Serena Torres in 2020.

Summary

Creator: Micheaux, Oscar, 1884-1951

Title: Oscar Micheaux papers

Date: 1871 - 1951 [bulk 1936 - 1951]

Size: 3.98 linear feet (13 boxes, 3 oversize folders)

Source: Purchase, 2018

Abstract: Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was a prominent African American author of the early 20th century, and more notably the first African American filmmaker. The Oscar Micheaux papers consist of professional correspondence, financial records, handwritten scenarios and typed dialogues for his films, galleys and proofs of published work. Additionally, there are ephemeral items, clippings, prospectuses, and other forms of advertising for his works.

Preferred citation: [Item], Oscar Micheaux papers, Sc MG 972, 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: Processed by Serena Torres in 2020.

Separated Materials:

Transferred to the Art and Artifacts Division: 4 Posters; stereotype plate and proof for *The Masquerade*; 11 stamps of various texts.

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

Transferred to the Photographs and Prints Division: one flat box of lobby cards; photographs; and negatives.

Creator History

Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951), was a prominent African American author of the early 20th century, and more notably the first African American filmmaker. Micheaux was born in Metropolis, Illinois on January 2, 1884. He was one of thirteen children and the son of Calvin S. and Belle Michaux. Micheaux later added the "e" to his name. He lived in Chicago, Illinois; Harlem New York; and finally in Montclair, New Jersey. Micheaux was married three times. His first wife was Orlean McCracken; his second wife was Sarah Rutledge; and his third wife was Alice B. Russell, to whom he was married to until the time of his death. Oscar Micheaux died in 1951 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Before becoming an author, film director and independent producer, Micheaux was briefly a Pullman Porter and a farmer in Gregory County, South Dakota. After some success as a homesteader on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, a three year drought destroyed his crops. The reverse of his success as a farmer followed by what he has referenced as "peculiar circumstances" changed the course of his life, and he began writing and publishing.

Micheaux's life endeavors and experiences inspired his early works. His first book, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Homesteader* (1913) is recognized as his autobiography and reworked into his most famous novel *The Homesteader* (1917). Through his Book Supply Company in Harlem, Micheaux self-published many of his novels such as *The Wind from Nowhere* (1941); *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (1944); *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield* (1946), and *The Masquerade* (1947).

Micheaux's first film, *The Homesteader*, was released in 1919 and was adapted from his novel of the same name. It was the first film to include an all-black cast. As an independent filmmaker of Micheaux Pictures Corporation, founded in 1918, Micheaux is credited with 44 films between 1919 and 1948, including his first sound film *The Exile* (1931); *Temptation* (1935); *God's Stepchildren* (1938); *Lying Lips* (1939); *The Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940), and his final film *The Betrayal* (1948), which was adapted from his novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*. Micheaux put a great deal of effort and finances into the making of this film. The premier was held at the historically white Mansfield Theater on Broadway in New York City, which was a success in itself. Micheaux's race films, musicals, comedies, westerns, romances, and gangster films included themes such as African Americans passing for white, interracial marriage, and legal injustices. The roles played by African Americans in his films were a far cry from the stereotypical "Uncle Toms" and "Mammy" portrayals viewers were used to seeing during the early 20th century. Black actors in Micheaux's films played the roles of doctors, businessman, detectives, and lawyers. However, he did receive criticism for giving lead roles to light-skinned African American actors. Nevertheless, his movies challenged the dominant society and provided a window into black life and the African American perspective on race.

Scope and Content Note

These papers largely chronicle the last several decades of Oscar Micheaux's professional life as an author and his work as America's first Black filmmaker (1871-1951, bulk dates 1935-1951). The collection primarily consists of business records that include professional correspondence to and from Micheaux Pictures Corporation and his publishing company, Book Supply Company in Harlem of New York City. Correspondence are with film and filmmaking supply houses, theaters, film distributors, public relations firms, and legal documents regarding lawsuits against Micheaux. Noteworthy in the Writings series are materials that document the transformation of the book *Wind From Nowhere* to the film *The Betrayal*. Also included are clippings and ephemeral related to some of his works such as the *Case of Mrs. Wingate*. There is a synopsis for this same title. The Film series includes scenarios and dialogue for films such as *God's Stepchildren*, *Lying Lips*, and *Notorious Elinor Lee*.

Arrangement: Papers organized into four series: I. Personal; II. Business Records; III. Writings; and IV. Films

Key Terms

Subjects

Actresses, Black
African American actresses
African American authors -- New York (State) -- New York
African American motion picture producers and directors
Authors and publishers -- United States -- 20th century
Authors and publishers -- United States -- Correspondence
Authors, Black -- New York (State) -- New York -- 20th century
Race Films

Occupations

Authors, Black

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Letters (correspondence)
Screenplays

Names

Micheaux, Oscar, 1884-1951
Russell, Alice B.
Micheaux Film Corporation

Container List

Personal papers 1910 - 1951 [bulk 1949 - 1951]

There is a limited amount Oscar Micheaux personal papers. However, there are biographical documents such as a census form, with his signature that detail where he lived throughout his life and to whom he was married. Also included is a questionnaire for an entry in *Who's Who Among American Negroes* and a portion of that details his curriculum vitae, which lists his past and present positions at the time and a future project. There is very little personal correspondence from Micheaux, but a welcomed addition to this series are the papers of his wife Alice B. Micheaux (Alice B. Russell) (1910-1951), mostly prior to her marrying Micheaux.

Arranged into three sub-series: (I) Biographical; (II) Correspondence; and (III) Alice B. Micheaux (Alice B. Russell).

b. 1 f. 1 Biographical 1949 - 1951

There are only a few biographical documents, however they provide a substantial amount of information about Micheaux's life, such as where he lived throughout his life and the jobs he held.

Correspondence

There is a minimal amount of personal correspondence in this sub-series. However, there are documents that provide some insight on Micheaux's death and some of the financial burden that was imposed on his wife, Alice B. Micheaux.

b. 1 f. 2 1939

b. 1 f. 3 1949 - 1951

Alice B. Micheaux (Alice B. Russell) 1910 - 1951

Some of the documents in this sub-series date from before her marriage to Oscar Micheaux. It includes 2 scrapbooks of Alice's time as a "Dramatic Soprano." One of the scrapbooks includes the name Jack Mabey on the cover, but the relationship is not known. There are books of sheet music, a cookbook, and correspondence (very little) after her husband's death.

b. 2 f. 1 1910

b. 2 f. 2 Cheer the heart of a maiden is the heart of a bird 1912

b. 2 f. 3 Angela Morgan Forward March 1918

b. 2 f. 4 Irving Berlin World's favorite songs 1933

b. 2 f. 5 New Royal cookbook 1922

b. 2 f. 6 Scrapbook 1910

b. 2 f. 6 1920

b. 2 f. 6 1923 - 1924

b. 2 f. 6 Undated

b. 2 f. 7 Scrapbook 1921 - 1923

b. 2 f. 8 Notebooks 1926

b. 2 f. 8 1933 - 1934

b. 2 f. 8 1944

b. 2 f. 9 Miscellaneous 1940

b. 2 f. 9 1947

b. 2 f. 10 Correspondence and notes 1951

Business records 1871 - 1951 [bulk 1936 - 1951]

The Business records offer insight into Micheaux as an entrepreneur and his business strategies. There is significant correspondence in this series (1936-1951) that is arranged chronologically. Correspondence to and from Book Supply Company and Micheaux Pictures Corporation, are with film and filmmaking supply houses, theaters, film distributors, public relations firms, and attorneys. He kept copies of his replies to a great deal of the correspondence, so there are two sides to a conversation in a number of cases. The Contracts and Permits sub-series consists mainly of contracts with theater houses such as the Harlem Theater in Texas; Lee Theatre in Virginia; and the Lightman Theatre in Washington (1936-1949, bulk 1936-1939). Financial records, 1939-1951, consist of mainly bank records, which also includes bank records for Albert Williams. It is not apparent who Albert Williams is and how he is related to Micheaux, if at all. There are also receipts for printing services and order forms for his books from people all over the country. The Miscellaneous sub-series (1871-1950, bulk 1936-1949), consists of books, pamphlets and programs, clippings of book reviews, handwritten notes, lists of venues, and letterhead supplies for his two companies, Book Supply Company and Micheaux Pictures Corporation. There are books on composers and theater listings, which are likely related to his work as a filmmaker. There are also commencement programs from Columbia University during 1936 and 1938.

Arranged into four sub-series: (I) Correspondence; (II) Contracts and Permits; (III) Financial; and (IV) Miscellaneous.

Correspondence 1937 - 1951

Correspondence are with film and filmmaking supply houses, theaters, film distributors, public relations firms, and lawsuits against Micheaux. Micheaux kept copies of replies to a great deal of the correspondence. There are two sides to a conversation in a number of cases.

- b. 3 f. 1 1937 - 1938
- b. 3 f. 2 1939
- b. 3 f. 3 1940
- b. 3 f. 4 1943
- b. 3 f. 5 1944
- b. 3 f. 6 1945
- b. 3 f. 7 1946 - 1947
- b. 3 f. 8 1948
- b. 3 f. 9 1949
- b. 3 f. 10 1949
- b. 3 f. 11 1949
- b. 3 f. 12 1949 - 1950
- b. 3 f. 13 1950
- b. 3 f. 14 1951

Contracts and Permits 1936 - 1949 [bulk 1936 - 1939]

This series mainly consists of contracts with theaters showing Micheaux's films from 1936-1937 and 1949. These films include *The Darktown Revue*, 1931; *Harlem after Midnight*, 1934; *Murder in Harlem*, 1935; *Temptation*, 1935; *Underworld*, 1937; and *God's Stepchildren*, 1938. There are contracts that include films *Ten Minutes to Kill* and *Doomsday*, however, the contract may be referring to Micheaux's film *Ten Minutes to Live*, 1932. Also important to note, *Doomsday* is not listed in Micheaux's filmography.

- b. 4 f. 1 1936 - 1939
- b. 4 f. 2-3 1949
- b. 4 f. 4 Undated (blank)

Financial 1939 - 1950

Financial subseries, 1939-1950, consists mainly of bank records, including those of Albert Williams. It is not apparent how Albert Williams is related to Micheaux, if at all. Also included are receipts for printing services and order forms for his books from people all over the country.

- b. 5 f. 1 Blank Receipts

Business records (cont.)
Financial (cont.)

- b. 6 f. 1 Receipts 1939 - 1949
- b. 6 f. 2 Payroll 1944 - 1948
- b. 6 f. 3-4 Bank Records 1947 - 1948
- b. 6 f. 5 Bank Records - Albert Williams 1948
- b. 6 f. 6-11 Bank Records 1949 - 1951
- b. 6 f. 12-13 Order Forms 1950
- b. 7 f. 1 Legal documents 1950

Miscellaneous 1871 - 1950

Miscellaneous subseries, 1871-1950 (bulk 1936-1949), consists of books, pamphlets and programs, clippings of book reviews, handwritten notes, lists of venues, and letterhead supplies for his two companies, Book Supply Company and Micheaux Pictures Corporation. There are books on composers and theater listings, which are likely related to his work as a filmmaker. There are also commencement programs from Columbia University during 1936 and 1938.

- b. 8 f. 1 Books, Pamphlets and Programs 1871
- b. 8 f. 2 Books, Pamphlets and Programs 1928 - 1929
- b. 8 f. 3 Books, Pamphlets and Programs 1934
- b. 8 f. 4 Books, Pamphlets and Programs 1936 - 1938
- b. 8 f. 5 Books, Pamphlets and Programs 1941 - 1948
- b. 8 f. 6 Books, Pamphlets and Programs - Undated
- b. 8 f. 7 Lists and Notes 1939 - 1949
- b. 8 f. 7a Clippings 1942 - 1945
- b. 8 f. 8 Labels and Letterhead - Undated
- b. 8 f. 8a Labels and Letterhead - Undated
- b. 8 f. 9 Manuals - Undated
- b. 8 f. 10 Miscellaneous - Undated
- o. 1 Edward Sterling Wright in "A night with Dunbar" - ca. 1920s

Writings 1941 - 1950

This series features four of Micheaux's books, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1941); *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (1944); *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield* (1946); and *The Masquerade* (1947), which he published through his Book Supply Company in Harlem. This series includes book jackets, stereotype plate proofs, ephemera items, clippings of book reviews from clipping services, oversized galleys, and prospectuses. In this series are documents related to the *Wind From Nowhere* and its transformation into Micheaux's final film *The Betrayal*, including a set of four spiral notebooks of the handwritten scenario. Also included is the typed synopsis for *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* and a brief outline for a film adaptation.

Arranged chronologically into four sub-series: (I) *Wind from Nowhere*; (II) *Case of Mrs. Wingate*; (III) *Story Of Dorothy Stanfield*; and (IV) *Masquerade*.

Wind From Nowhere 1941 - 1945

Included in this sub-series is a set of four spiral notebooks with the handwritten scenario for the *Wind from Nowhere*, which transformed into the film *The Betrayal* (1948).

- b. 9 f. 1 Calendar book for the *Wind from Nowhere* 1941
- b. 9 f. 2 1941 - 1945
- b. 9 f. 3 1941 - 1945
- b. 10 f. 1 Scenario Book 1 (ca. 1940s)
- b. 10 f. 2 Scenario Book 2 (ca. 1940s)
- b. 10 f. 3 Scenario Book 3 (ca. 1940s)
- b. 10 f. 4 Scenario Book 4 (ca. 1940s)

Writings (cont.)

Wind From Nowhere (cont.)

o. 2 Wind from Nowhere Advertisement (ca. 1941)

Case of Mrs. Wingate 1944 - 1950

Includes a typed synopsis for *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* and a brief outline for a movie for this book. Also included is a deluxe edition of the book (1944) that is inscribed with Ruth B. Jones's name and address.

b. 11 f. 1 Deluxe edition copy of The Case of Mrs. Wingate 1944

b. 11 f. 1a 1944

b. 11 f. 2 Book Reviews 1944 - 1945

b. 11 f. 3 Case of Mrs. Wingate Outline 1949

b. 11 f. 4 Correspondence 1949 - 1950

b. 11 f. 5 Case of Mrs. Wingate Synopsis 1950

Story of Dorothy Stanfield 1946

Includes stereotype plate proofs, loose chapters, ephemera and over sized galleys.

b. 12 f. 1 1946

o. 3 Galleys (ca. 1946)

Masquerade 1947

Includes stereotype plates and proofs.

b. 12 f. 2 1947

Films 1935 - 1950

The Films series consists of documents on five of Micheaux's films; *Temptation* (1935), *God's Stepchildren* (1938), *Lying Lips* (1939), *Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940), and *The Betrayal* (1948), all of which he produced and directed. Included is a typed scenario for *God's Stepchildren* and typed dialogue for *Lying Lips* and *Notorious Elinor Lee*. Also included is correspondence specifically related to *The Betrayal* along with ephemera for opening nights for the film in several theaters in New York City including the Mansfield Theater on Broadway. The film had its premiere at the historically white Mansfield theater, which was a first for the theater. In this series is also a handwritten sheet that is part of an unknown script.

Arranged chronologically into six sub-series: (I) *Temptation*; (II) *God's Stepchildren*; (III) *Lying Lips*; (IV) *Notorious Elinor Lee*; (V) *Betrayal*; and (VI) *Unknown*.

Temptation

b. 13 f. 1 1935

God's Stepchildren

Includes a typed scenario for *God's Stepchildren*.

b. 13 f. 2 Scenario 1937 - 1940

Lying Lips

Includes typed dialogue for *Lying Lips*.

b. 13 f. 3 1939

b. 13 f. 4 *Lying Lips* - Dialogue 1939

Notorious Elinor Lee

Includes dialogue for the *Notorious Elinor Lee*.

b. 13 f. 5 1939 - 1940

Betrayal

Includes correspondence specifically related to the film along with ephemera for opening nights in several theaters in New York City including the Mansfield Theater on Broadway. The film had its premiere at the historically white Mansfield theater, which was a first for the theater.

b. 13 f. 6 1947 - 1950

b. 13 f. 7 Unknown - Part of a script (one page)