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Guide to the Oscar Serlin papers 1890s-1960s *T-Mss 1977-002

Compiled by Diana Bertolini and Cate Putirskis, September 2011

Summary

Creator: Serlin, Oscar, 1901-1971

Title: Oscar Serlin papers, 1890s-1960s

Size: 25.15 linear feet (62 boxes)

Source: Donated by Mrs. Babbette Serlin in 1977.

Abstract: Oscar Serlin (1901-1971) was an American theatrical producer in the first half of the 20th century, most famous for the long-running play *Life with Father*. This collection consists of his personal and professional papers.

Access: For permission to publish, contact the Billy Rose Theatre Division.

Preferred citation: Oscar Serlin papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

Related collections

Clarance Day papers.Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

Dorothy Stickney papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Creator history

Oscar Selin was born on January 30, 1901 in Russian Poland. In 1910 Selin's family immigrated to Chicago. Serlin faced a certain amount of bullying because of his heavy accent during his childhood, but he eventually overcame this obstacle and attended De Paul Academy and De Paul University, where he was a football star.

An interest in theater brought Serlin to New York, where he worked for producer Marion Gering on the 1928 production Skidding. All but forgotten today, this play introduced the Hardy family, which would be the subject of a hugely popular film series starring Mickey Rooney and Lewis Stone. Gering and Serlin's next production, Broken Dishes (1929) featured a young actress on the brink of movie mega-stardom, Bette Davis.

Serlin himself also went to Hollywood in the early 1930s, along with the influx of stage writers and actors that the advent of talking pictures demanded. While working as a talent scout, publicist and associate producer for David O'Selznick, Serlin was one of a five man casting committee for the highly anticipated film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind. Serlin and his colleagues conducted multiple surveys to get opinions from Hollywood experts on which actors should be cast in the film, not just for the roles of Scarlett and Rhett, but also a dozen other characters.

Back in New York, in 1939, Serlin hit the jackpot with his production of Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse's play, Life with Father, based on the autobiographical stories of Clarence Day. Playwright Howard Lindsay also originated the title role, opposite his wife, Dorothy Stickney. The play, a charming and gently humorous portrait of domestic life in 1890s New York sparked with New York audiences. Coming off the Great Depression, with the rumblings of another World War coming from Europe, this piece of nostalgic Americana was exactly what the public needed.

Life with Father surpassed Tobacco Road's record for longest running production of Broadway. In the subsequent years, Life with Father's eight-year, 3224 performance run has been overtaken by several musicals, but it remains the longest running play. It toured the country in multiple companies, and was also produced in London and adapted for radio, film and television. During its run, Serlin opened and closed four other productions, The Moon is Down (1942), Strip for Action (1942), The Family (1943) and Beggars Are Coming to Town (1945). These were all flops, but it didn't matter much to Serlin's finances. Life with Father had made him a millionaire.

His final venture was the sequel, Life with Mother, again written by Linday and Crouse and starring Lindsay and Stickney. It was only a modest success at 262 performances. After this Serlin retired from active producing, but continued to be involved with the theatre community, taking an acting role as an administrator for the Dramatists' Guild and ANTA.

Oscar Serlin was married to Jane Fortune with whom he had two children, Michael and Dorothy. He was later married to Babbette "Bobbi" Block, with whom he had one son, Anthony. Oscar Serlin died in New York City on February 27, 1971.

Scope and content note

This collection consists of the personal and professional papers of American theatrical producer Oscar Serlin. The Family and Personal records are composed primarily of correspondence and photographs of Oscar Serlin and his family members, including his wife, mother and father, and children as well as a small amount of other topical files kept by Oscar Serlin regarding his personal life. This series also contains files about Brookbox (the Serlin family estate), vacations, presents and wills.

The Production Files document Oscar Serlin's stage productions (and potential productions), most notably, Life With Father, the production for which he is most well-known and its sequel, Life With Mother. These files contain scripts, contracts with theaters, actors, and for film, television and radio rights; financial records pertaining to the productions; clippings, programs, and other press; correspondence; photographs, and other items related to the productions. A few general production files not related to any specific show are also present.

The Professional Files contain files related to Oscar Serlin's business activities, unrelated to specific stage productions, including his business correspondence; assorted topical, financial, and administrative files relating to his production companies; and plays submitted to Serlin to be considered for production.

Arrangement

The Oscar Serlin papers are organized into the following series:

Series I: Family and Personal Records, 1940-1960s Series II: Production Files, 1890s-1961 Series III: Professional Files, 1931-1958

Key terms

Subjects

Film -- Production and direction Theater -- Production and direction -- New York (State) -- New York Theater -- Reviews

Occupations

Theatrical producers and directors -- United States -- New York (N.Y.)

Places

United States -- New York (State) -- New York

Names

Crouse, Russell, 1893-1966 Lindsay, Howard, 1889-1968 Serlin, Oscar, 1901-1971

Special formats

Contracts Ledgers Paintings Personal correspondence Photgraphs Programs Scripts (documents)

Titles Life with Father Life with Mother

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- b.23 f.2 Serlin, Anthony, 1940s-1950s Includes documents pertaining to Dorothy Serlin and Michael Serlin.
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- b.9 f.1 Serlin, Jane Carter, 1940-1954
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- b.9 f.5 Serlin, Michael, 1949-1955
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- b.9 f.14-15 "W" Correspondence, 1949-1951
 - b.9 f.16 Wills, undated
 - b.7 f.4 Wills, 1942-1946
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 - b.9 f.17 "X-Y-Z" Correspondence, 1950

Series II: Production Files, 1890s-1961 (31 boxes)

The bulk of this series focuses on Serlin's most famous production, the record-breaking hit *Life with Father*, and its sequel *Life with Mother*. Other productions are covered here as well, but these two are represented much more extensively. All production files may include such materials as contracts, publicity materials, scripts, financial records and correspondence. The files on the two major productions also contain cast lists; biographies; negotiations with Actors Equity; costume, property and set inventories and designs (including oversized paintings). The Production Files are arranged alphabetically by show title.

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Series III: Professional Files, 1931-1958 (24 boxes)

This series has been arranged into four categories, Correspondence, Financial Files, Subject Files, and Submitted Plays. The Subject files contain information kept by Serlin on various topics, some related to his business and show production activities and others concerning cultural interests and organizations that occupied Serlin's life after his retirement. Some correspondence is present in these files, but files are comprised mostly clippings, brochures, financial records, notes, inventories, and other informational items. These provide a valuable historical record of cultural life in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Serlin's financial ventures, including Oscar Serlin Associates, Oscar Serlin Productions and the Oscar Serlin Trustees are also represented here. The alphabetical run of Submitted Plays includes works by notable authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and William Carlos Williams.

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b.51 f.6	Culture, Society and Politics, 1940s, 1950s
b.14 f.4	Department of Labor, 1951
b.14 f.5	Designers, 1948-1949
b.52 f.1-2	Dramatists Guild, 1942-1957
b.14 f.6-7	Europe, 1949-1955
b.14 f.8	Filing, 1949-1950
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b.52 f.3	Gone With the Wind Casting Commission, 1937
b.52 f.4	Hollywood, undated
b.14 f.10	Imports, 1949-1951
b.14 f.11-12	Index, 1945-1946
b.14 f.13-14	Interviews, 1951, undated
b.14 f.15	Japanese Project, 1954-1955
b.15 f.1	League of New York Theatres, 1947
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b.52 f.5	Movies, 1940s, 1950s
b.15 f.17	New York Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1940-1941
b.15 f.18	Office Applications, 1951-1955
b.21 f.12	Office Contracts, 1949-1952
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b.52 f.6	Office-Various Files, undated
b.52 f.7-8	Paintings, Sculpture-Exhibitions, 1940s, 1950s
b.53 f.1-2	Paintings, Sculpture-Exhibitions, 1940s, 1950s
b.16 f.40	Patron, 1949-1954
b.16 f.41	Patron Appeals, 1940-1950

b.16 f.42 Patron Stage for Action, 1944-1946

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b.16 f.43	Pictures in Office, 1948
b.53 f.3	Poetry, 1940s, 1950s
b.17 f.2	Remington Rand, 1945-1946
b.17 f.3	Remington Rand: Cardex, 1946
b.17 f.4	Reorganization of Files, 1946
b.17 f.5	Rep, 1949-1951
b.17 f.6	Revues, undated
b.53 f.4	Resumes, Biographies and References, 1950s
b.21 f.14	Rockefeller Center Inc., 1948-1953
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b.17 f.8-9	Scripts, 1948-1951
b.54 f.1	Serlin, Max-Estate, 1955-1960
b.17 f.1	Shaw, George Bernard , 1949-1952
b.54 f.2	Shaw, George Bernard , 1940s, 1950s
b.17 f.10	Shaw Society, 1952-1955
b.54 f.3	Sheet Music, undated
b.17 f.11	Societe des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques, 1953
b.18 f.1	Symposium, 1949
b.18 f.8	Symposium Plans, 1948-1949
b.18 f.2	Television, 1952
b.54 f.4-6	Theater, 1940s, 1950s
b.55 f.1	Theater and Dance-Incomplete Programs, 1940s
b.55 f.2-3	Theater Organizations, 1940s, 1950s
b.18 f.3	Theatrical Managers & Agents Union, 1945
b.18 f.4	Ticket Agencies, 1949
b.18 f.5	Tinsels, 1951-1954
b.18 f.6	Transportation, 1951
b.55 f.4	West Coast , 1933-1934
b.18 f.7	Wright, Frank Lloyd, 1948
	Submitted Plays, 1958-1962, undated
b.56 f.1	Apple Core by Robert England, 1961
b.56 f.2	Assignment in Judea by Patrick Welch, 1958
b.56 f.3	Better with Two by Ben Starr, 1959
b.56 f.4	Black Yankee by Stephen Gross, undated
b.56 f.5	Catch a Falling Star by Meade Roberts, undated
b.56 f.6	The Color of Splendor by Sam McCulloch, undated
b.56 f.7	Dear Audience by William Kaye, 1959
b.56 f.8	The Diploma by Roy Stahl, undated
h 56 f 9	The Guilty by Harry Grapick updated

Series III: Professional Files (cont.)

Submitted Plays (cont.)

- b.57 f.1 Hat in Hand by David Rogers and Raymond Scott, undated
- b.57 f.2 Is There Intelligent Life on Earth? by Roberts Crean, 1962
- b.57 f.3 Legend of the King's Maid by Ferenc Molnar, undated
- b.57 f.4 Madison Avenoo by Sherman Marks, undated
- b.57 f.5 Many Loves by William Carlos Williams, undated
- b.57 f.6 Only the Game-Fish Swim Upstream by Mae Savell Croy, undated
- b.57 f.7 Penelope by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., undated
- b.57 f.8 A Place High Enough by Sam McCulloch, undated
- b.57 f.9 The Stone Monkey by Sam McCuloch, undated