



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Mielziner family papers

1890-1935

*T-Mss 1993-006

Processed by Wm. Charles Morrow.

Summary

Creator: Mielziner family

Title: Mielziner family papers

Date: 1890-1935

Size: 3.38 linear feet. (5 boxes + 1 portfolio)

Source: Donated by Joanna and Leo F. Caproni, Jr.

Abstract: Artist Leo Mielziner (1869-1935) and his wife Ella McKenna Friend Mielziner (1873-1968), raised two sons, each of whom became prominent in the arts: Leo J. (1899-1962), a stage and screen actor and director who worked under the name Kenneth MacKenna, and Jo Mielziner (1901-1976), one of the most influential designers of theatrical scenery and lighting of the twentieth century. The Mielziner family papers consist of correspondence, most of it personal but some of a more formal nature, other papers, a few sketches, clippings, ephemera, and family photographs, some of which have been placed in small albums.

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Creator History

Artist Leo Mielziner (1869-1935) and his wife Ella McKenna Friend Mielziner (1873-1968), raised two sons, each of whom became prominent in the arts: Leo Jr. (1899-1962), a stage and screen actor and director who worked under the name Kenneth McKenna, and Jo Mielziner (1901-1976), one of the most influential designers of theatrical scenery and lighting of the twentieth century.

The son of a rabbi, Leo Mielziner was born in New York on December 8, 1869. After the family resettled in Cincinnati, Ohio, Leo studied at the Cincinnati Art Museum Academy, and later in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts. In 1896 Leo married Ella McKenna Friend, born March 18, 1873 in Manchester, New Hampshire, of Anglo-Irish descent. Their respective families were progressive for the time, and it appears that no strong objections were raised to the Jewish-Catholic marriage. Leo and Ella raised their two sons first in Europe, then in New York, where Leo supported the family by taking commissions as a portraitist for well-to-do and often prominent clients, including Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, John D. Rockefeller and Gen. John J. Pershing. In his last years Leo's health declined, and although he continued to draw almost to the end, in retirement he and Ella were primarily supported by their sons. The couple spent their final days together in a cottage in Truro, Massachusetts on Cape Cod, where Leo died of cancer on August 11, 1935. Ella, who resettled in Manhattan, outlived her husband by more than three decades, and was 94 years old when she died on February 2, 1968.

Elder son Leo Mielziner Jr., was born on August 19, 1899 in Canterbury, New Hampshire, and while still in his teens was acting in and directing stage plays. After military service Leo signed a three-year acting contract with producer William Brady, and soon changed his name to Kenneth MacKenna (adapting the name from his mother's family line, with a slight change in spelling). By 1923 Kenneth had appeared in seven Broadway shows, and had toured the country in two of them. His stage credits include *Nerves* (1924) with Humphrey Bogart and Mary Philips (who were later to marry), and *What Every Woman Knows* (1926), with Helen Hayes. In 1929 MacKenna was among the many stage actors sought by Hollywood studios to appear in early talking pictures. Having signed a contract with Fox Films to play leading roles, MacKenna moved to California and appeared in a number of movies, including John Ford's *Men Without Women* (1930), George Cukor's *Virtuous Sin* (1930) with Walter Huston and Kay Francis, and *Those We Love* (1932) with Mary Astor, among others. MacKenna also directed several movies, including *The Spider* (1931) and *Walls of Gold* (1933). He was married to actress Kay Francis from 1931 to 1934. In the mid-1930s MacKenna returned to New York and resumed his stage career. In 1938 he married onetime co-star Mary Philips, former wife of Humphrey Bogart. Shortly afterward he was hired as story editor for MGM, first in New York and then back in Hollywood, where he eventually became head of the department. In the late 1950s Kenneth McKenna left MGM and resumed his acting career, appearing on Broadway in Dore Schary's drama *The Highest Tree* (1959) and on screen in *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1961). He died of cancer in January 1962, at the age of 62.

Joseph "Jo" Mielziner, sometimes called the Dean of Designers, created scenic and lighting elements for dozens of Broadway shows, as well as Off-Broadway, regional, and university productions, from the 1920s to the 1970s. In the course of his long career he became a highly influential figure, not only in stage design but in theater architecture and even in playwriting, which he helped shape with his designs. Jo was born in Paris, France, on March 19, 1901. Although his earliest educational experiences were in various European schools, after 1909 Jo and his brother Leo were raised primarily in New York. After brief military service during the final days of the First World War, Jo studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy, then back in Europe. Through the influence of his brother, now known as actor Kenneth MacKenna, Jo was hired to design sets for Theatre Guild productions, including *The Guardsman* (1924) featuring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

Beginning in 1925, Jo worked as an assistant to the innovative stage designer Robert Edmond Jones, whom he would always cite as a major influence. In the years that followed Jo designed a substantial

number of Broadway productions, usually handling both scenic and lighting design. Among the most successful of the non-musical plays were Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928), Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (1929), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1931) with Katharine Cornell, *Dodsworth* (1934), Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* (1935), and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938). Musicals designed by Jo Mielziner included the Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), Cole Porter's *Gay Divorce* (1931) with Fred Astaire, Rodgers & Hart's *On Your Toes* (1936) and *Pal Joey* (1940), then, after Richard Rodgers had teamed with Oscar Hammerstein, *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951), among many others. The postwar years brought two of Jo's best known designs, each of which was reputed to have helped influence the playwright's text, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

Although he continued designing Broadway productions all his life, usually working out of his home studio at the Dakota apartment complex off Central Park West, Jo Mielziner's later years saw changes in the world which had an impact on his career. During the 1950s, the rise of television gave live theater formidable competition. Costs for mounting Broadway productions rose sharply, which led to a gradual decrease in the number of shows staged, while the rise of Off-Broadway theater drew more adventurous playgoers elsewhere. In addition, producers eager to cut costs began hiring younger designers who were struggling to establish themselves, and whose fees were lower than Jo's. Despite these factors, there were still successes in the latter portion of Jo's career, including Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the stage and film versions of William Inge's *Picnic* (1953 and 1955), *Gypsy* (1959) with Ethel Merman, Woody Allen's *Don't Drink the Water* (1966), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1968), and *1776* (1969). During this time Jo also offered his services as an architectural consultant for theaters, and became more involved in the technology of stage lighting. The last Broadway show designed by Jo Mielziner was *In Praise of Love* (1974), a moderate success on the strength of its stars, Rex Harrison and Julie Harris. In March of 1976, Jo was at work on a musical version of the French film *The Baker's Wife* (which, ultimately, closed out of town) when he died suddenly of a heart attack in the back seat of a taxi, on his way home to the Dakota. He was four days short of his 75th birthday.

Scope and Content Note

The Mielziner family papers consist of correspondence, most of it personal but some of a more formal nature, other papers, a few sketches, clippings, ephemera, and family photographs, some of which have been placed in small albums.

Much of the correspondence is between family members. During periods of separation, Leo and wife Ella wrote to one another, the boys wrote to their parents while away at camp, and in later years the sons continued to write to one another. The parents kept a number of childhood letters and drawings by their sons, especially Valentines, as well as a poem about King Arthur written by 9 year-old Jo, which his parents arranged to have published in F. P. Adams' newspaper humor column (clipping included with original poem). As Leo Sr.'s health began to fail in the early 1930s, letters from both sons, and from other friends and relatives, increased in number.

Correspondence from other relatives includes a series of detailed, vivid letters written by Ella's mother, Margaret McKenna Friend, describing life in the wartime Paris of 1914-1919. During the period when Kenneth MacKenna was working in the movies, 1929-1934, his letters shed interesting light on life in Hollywood from an insider's perspective, as his marriage to star Kay Francis put Kenneth on the "A-list" for parties. Aside from a few brief notes from Kay, there are no celebrity correspondents represented here, but Kenneth's own letters to his parents and brother describe tennis matches with Charlie Chaplin, boating trips with Howard Hawks, a dinner party with the 1932 Olympic Committee at the

home of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, etc. Once he is back in New York, Kenneth writes of dinners with the Bogarts, Noel Coward, Moss Hart, etc. The best known Mielziner correspondent outside the world of show business is Phoebe Atwood Taylor (1909-1976), author of numerous murder mysteries, a friend of the family who corresponded with Ella.

Many of Jo Mielziner's letters to his parents describe his current projects, but not in great detail. In the wake of failed shows, he sometimes speculates about the possible causes. He also mentions the work of other theater professionals, as in the note to his parents dated March 26, 1935, written just before leaving, with Kenneth, for the premiere of the latest offering from the Group Theatre, *Waiting for Lefty* ("Don't know what to expect," writes Jo, "probably a good performance and too much propaganda").

The photographs are mostly family vacation shots, family group portraits, and a few formal, studio-posed portraits, including several copies of a trio portrait made up of Leo Sr., Kenneth, and Jo. There are many photos of Jo and his second wife Annie Laurie Jacques vacationing at Eaton's Ranch, a "dude ranch" located in Wolf, Wyoming, during the summer of 1934.

Arrangement: Series I : Correspondence Sub-series 1 - Leo Mielziner, Sr. correspondence Sub-series 2 - Ella Mielziner correspondence Sub-series 3 - Leo Sr. & Ella Mielziner correspondence Sub-series 4 - Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.) correspondence Sub-series 5 - Jo Mielziner correspondence Series II : Ephemera Sub-series 1 - Personal papers Sub-series 2 - Photographs

Key Terms

Subjects

Motion pictures -- California -- Los Angeles -- History
Set designers
Stage lighting designers -- United States
Theater -- New York (State) -- New York

Names

Mielziner family
Francis, Kay, 1905-1968
Friend, Margaret McKenna
MacKenna, Kenneth, 1899-1962
Mielziner, Ella McKenna Friend
Mielziner, Jo, 1901-1976
Mielziner, Leo, 1869-1935
Stearns, Theodore
Taylor, Phoebe Atwood, 1909-1976

Container List

Series I : Correspondence 1890-1935 (46 folders)

This series consists of correspondence between Leo Mielziner and his wife Ella, letters to the couple from their sons, correspondence between Kenneth and Jo, notes written by their wives (Kay Francis and Annie Laurie Jacques, respectively), and letters to Leo, Ella, Kenneth, and Jo, from relatives and friends.

Sub-series 1 - Leo Mielziner, Sr. correspondence 1890-1935 (11 folders)

Letters to Leo include one apiece from his mother and brother, many letters from wife Ella during periods of separation between 1905 and 1911, childhood notes from each son (as well as art by Jo), letters from each son written in adulthood, and numerous letters from friends, most of which date from the 1930s, when Leo's health was in decline. The best-known correspondent outside the Mielziner family is author Edith Ayrton Zangwill, widow of Israel Zangwill, whom Leo had known. There is also one 1890 letter of commendation written to Leo's father, Dr. Moses Mielziner, by the principal of Leo's school, praising the young man as a student and an artist.

- b. 1 f. 1 Letters pre-dating Leo's marriage 1890s
- b. 1 f. 2 Ella Mielziner 1905
- b. 1 f. 3 Ella Mielziner 1910
- b. 1 f. 4 Ella Mielziner 1911
- b. 1 f. 5 Leo Mielziner, Jr. 1911, 1931-1935
- b. 1 f. 6 Jo Mielziner 1910, 1918, 1931-1933
- b. 1 f. 7 Jo Mielziner 1935
- b. 1 f. 8 To Leo Mielziner, Sr., from friends 1919 - early 1930s
- b. 1 f. 9 To Leo Mielziner, Sr., from friends 1933
- b. 1 f. 10 To Leo Mielziner, Sr., from friends 1934
- b. 1 f. 11 To Leo Mielziner, Sr., from friends 1935

Sub-series 2 - Ella Mielziner correspondence 1910-1935 (18 folders)

Letters to Ella include many written by husband Leo at various times between 1910 and 1935, the year of his death. There are letters from each son spanning childhood into early adulthood, with a considerable amount of Juvenilia, especially Valentines from each boy addressed to Ella. Also includes letters to Ella and the family written by her mother, Margaret McKenna Friend, from wartime Paris 1914-1919, and letters to Ella from mystery writer Phoebe Atwood Taylor. The wartime letters from Ella's mother are sharply detailed, painting a vivid picture of the city during the Great War and the early postwar period.

- b. 1 f. 12 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1910
- b. 1 f. 13 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1911
- b. 1 f. 14 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1915
- b. 1 f. 15 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1916
- b. 1 f. 16 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1917-1918
- b. 1 f. 17 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1919
- b. 1 f. 18 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1933-1935
- b. 1 f. 19 Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.) ca. 1910-1918, 1929-1935
- b. 1 f. 20 Jo Mielziner ca. 1910-1919
- b. 1 f. 21 Jo Mielziner 1933-1935
- b. 2 f. 1 Margaret McKenna Friend 1914
- b. 2 f. 2 Margaret McKenna Friend 1915
- b. 2 f. 3 Margaret McKenna Friend 1916

Series I : Correspondence (cont.)

Sub-series 2 - Ella Mielziner correspondence (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 4 Margaret McKenna Friend 1917
- b. 2 f. 5 Margaret McKenna Friend 1918
- b. 2 f. 6 Margaret McKenna Friend 1919
- b. 2 f. 7 To Ella Mielziner from family and friends 1900-1935
- b. 2 f. 8 Phoebe Taylor Atwood 1934-1935

Sub-series 3 - Leo Sr. and Ella Mielziner Correspondence 1910-1935 (8 folders)

Consists of correspondence from each of the Mielziners' two sons, covering everything from childhood descriptions of summer camp to their respective professional activities in adulthood. Correspondence from son Kenneth MacKenna encompasses his Hollywood period as a film actor and director, his marriage to movie star Kay Francis, the end of the marriage and his return to a stage acting career in New York. Kenneth's letters to his parents during this period provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of movie-making during the early talkie days, while his status as Kay Francis' husband helped Kenneth meet a number of prominent figures. Much of Kenneth's correspondence during 1934 concerns a stage production of *Othello* in which he played Iago to Walter Huston's Moor. Material pertaining to son Jo includes Juvenilia of various kinds dated between 1910 and 1921, including several examples of childhood art, and a poem about King Arthur which Jo's parents arranged to have published in Franklin Pierce Adams' newspaper humor column. The mature Jo's letters to his parents describe social events, travels (a number of them were written from a Wyoming "dude ranch") and his professional activities. He often writes about his current projects and his collaborators, and also about future plans. After unsuccessful productions, he sometimes writes a 'post mortem,' speculating about the reasons for the failure. He also speaks in more general terms: in one letter dated June 1935, Jo predicts that the next ten years in the theater may bring great change, and remarks that he must learn to be more adventurous in his work.

- b. 2 f. 9 Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.) 1910, 1929-1931
- b. 2 f. 10 Kenneth MacKenna 1932-1933
- b. 2 f. 11 Kenneth MacKenna 1934
- b. 2 f. 12 Kenneth MacKenna 1935
- b. 2 f. 13 Jo Mielziner ca. 1914, 1918-1919
- b. 2 f. 14 Jo Mielziner 1930-1933
- b. 2 f. 15 Jo Mielziner 1934
- b. 2 f. 16 Jo Mielziner 1935

Sub-series 4 - Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.) Correspondence 1910-1935 (5 folders)

Includes poems written by Leo, Jr., from his teenage years into his early 20s, a few letters from his father and brother, letters and notes from various friends, fans, and associates, and material pertaining to Kay Francis, the movie star to whom Kenneth was married from 1931 to 1934. This consists of three notes written by Kay to Kenneth's parents, a 1932 note she addressed to "Darling" (presumably Kenneth) during the making of *Trouble in Paradise*, in which she describes director Ernst Lubitsch as "a genius," and brief newspaper clippings dated February 1934, announcing Kay's divorce from Kenneth MacKenna.

- b. 3 f. 1 Juvenilia and poems 1910-1921
- b. 3 f. 2 Leo Mielziner, Sr. 1919-1920
- b. 3 f. 3 Jo Mielziner 1918-1919, 1933-1934
- b. 3 f. 4 Material pertaining to Kay Francis 1931-1934
- b. 3 f. 5 Miscellaneous correspondence 1929-1935

Series I : Correspondence (cont.)

Sub-series 5 - Jo Mielziner Correspondence 1910-1935 (4 folders)

Includes Jo's original childhood poem about King Arthur, a clipping of its (slightly revised) appearance in Franklin Pierce Adams' newspaper humor column, five small portrait sketches of five unidentified men, a few letters from members of his family, two letters from friends, and material pertaining to Jo's second wife, Annie Laurie Jacques, dated 1933-35. This last consists of her letters to Jo, to Jo's parents, and one note to Ella during Leo Sr.'s final health crisis.

- b. 3 f. 6 Juvenilia and drawings ca. 1910-1921
- b. 3 f. 7 From Leo Mielziner, Sr., Ella Mielziner, and Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.) 1918-1929
- b. 3 f. 8 Material pertaining to Annie Laurie Jacques 1933-1935
- b. 3 f. 9 Miscellaneous correspondence 1932-1935

Series II : Ephemera ca. 1890-1935 (3 folders, 2 boxes, 1 portfolio)

This series consists of personal papers of various kinds, and photographs of Mielziner family members, relatives, and friends.

Sub-series 1 - Personal Papers 1915-1935 (3 folders)

Includes genealogical material pertaining to the Mielziner family, primarily consisting of acknowledgment notes from various libraries and historical societies thanking Leo and Ella for copies of a book devoted to the Mielziner family tree, which they had donated to several such institutions during 1934-35. Ella compiled several genealogical books between 1928 and 1935, and also wrote a biography of her father-in-law, Moses Mielziner. General personal papers include sheet music for a tune composed in Leo Sr.'s honor by Theodore Stearns in 1920, and other miscellaneous items such as unused postcards, Leo Sr.'s membership certificate from the Truro Neighborhood Association, a pamphlet from Eaton's Ranch in Wolf, Wyoming, and two small facsimile copies of Leo Sr.'s portrait of General John J. Pershing.

- b. 3 f. 10 Genealogical material 1931-1935
- b. 3 f. 11 Music-related material 1920-1933
- b. 3 f. 12 Miscellaneous Papers 1915-1934

Sub-series 2 - Photographs ca. 1890-1934 (2 boxes + 1 portfolio)

Includes several portraits of Leo Mielziner, Sr., two portraits of Leo and Ella Mielziner, several portraits of Kenneth MacKenna, several copies of a studio portrait featuring Leo Mielziner, Kenneth MacKenna, and Jo Mielziner, all undated and many small snapshots taken during the summer of 1934 at Eaton Ranch in Wolf, Wyoming, of Jo and his second wife Annie Laurie Jacques. There are also numerous portraits of Mielziner relatives and friends, two albums of family photos, also undated and one large black & white print (approx. 11" x 13.5") depicting the interior of the Cape Playhouse of Dennis, Massachusetts, ca. 1930.

- b. 4 f. 1 Leo Mielziner, Sr.
- b. 4 f. 2 Leo Mielziner, Sr. and Ella Mielziner
- b. 4 f. 3 Kenneth MacKenna (Leo Mielziner, Jr.), Jo Mielziner, and Leo Mielziner, Sr.
- b. 4 f. 4 Jo Mielziner and wife Annie Laurie Jacques, Wyoming 1934
- b. 4 f. 5-7 Mielziner family and friends (3 folders)

Miscellaneous undated photographs of the Mielziner family and friends; includes prints, tin types, snapshots and negatives, many are from the late 19th-early 20th century.

- b. 4 f. 8 Album 1: Family photos
- b. 5 Album 2: Family photos
- b. 6 (portfolio) Photo of Cape Playhouse, Dennis, Mass. ca. 1930