



The New York Public Library  
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

**Robert Chesley papers**

1978-2005 [bulk 1980s-1990s]

\*T-Mss 2010-112

Compiled by Joyce Joseph, 2015.

## Summary

**Creator:** Chesley, Robert, 1943-1990

**Title:** Robert Chesley papers

**Date:** 1978-2005 [bulk 1980s-1990s]

**Size:** 4.1 linear feet (11 boxes)

**Source:** Donated by Victor Bumbalo, 2010

**Abstract:** Robert Chesley (1943-1990) was a pioneering gay playwright who created homoerotic plays. The Robert Chesley papers date from 1978 to 2005 (bulk dates 1980s-1990s) and contain scripts, correspondence, clippings, publications, photographs, posters, and audio-visual recordings.

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**Preferred citation:** Robert Chesley papers, \*T-Mss 2010-112. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

**Processing note:** Compiled by Joyce Joseph, 2015 Compiled by Joyce Joseph, 2015.

### Related Materials:

Robert Chesley scores, 1964-1976. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the

Performing Arts.

## Creator History

Robert Chesley (1943-1990) was a pioneering gay playwright who created homoerotic plays. In the late 1970s, he moved to New York City, proclaimed his homosexuality, and pursued an openly gay approach to theater and writing. In 1980, his first one-act play *Hell, I Love You* was produced. His play *Night Sweat* (1984) was one of the first to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in a theatrical production. In 1986, Chesley's play *Jerker or the Helping Hand* was the center of a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) censorship attempt after excerpts aired on a radio broadcast. Chesley wrote numerous plays throughout his career, and a few of them were published in books. *Dogs Plays* and *Private Theatricals: Morning, Noon, and Night* were written during the final years of his life, but produced after his death of an AIDS-related illness in 1990.

Chesley was a member of The Dramatists Guild, Inc. Nicholas Deutsch, a longtime friend and director, was Chesley's literary executor.

## Scope and Content Note

The Robert Chesley papers date from 1978 to 2005 (bulk dates 1980s-1990s) and contain scripts, correspondence, clippings, publications, photographs, posters, and audio-visual recordings.

The bulk of the collection consists of scripts for Chesley's original plays. His development process is documented through the manuscript drafts and subsequent typescripts for plays such as *Jerker or the Helping Hand* and *Private Theatricals: Morning, Noon, and Night*. There are production materials for several of the plays. There are other writings such as a typewritten draft of *If a Man Will but Take Me by the Hand: A Porn Novel*, and words and music for the *Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts* play in the *Fuck the Holidays* collection.

*Jerker* is the most prominent play in the collection. In addition to the scripts, there are sound cue recordings, correspondence, programs, and other supporting materials from numerous productions of the play. The majority of the correspondence is between the producers and Nicholas Deutsch, Chesley's literary executor. There is also a large amount of clippings about the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) obscenity investigation into the 1980s radio broadcast of the play.

There are several interviews with Chesley in publications such as *Taste of Latex* and *Stallion*, where he discussed his work and lifestyle. His addresses such as "Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool of the Right," and his presentation at Epidemic, Center Stage (1987) provide context to his theatrical work, and communicates his perspective on gay culture and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

The photographs reveal aspects of Chesley's personal life such as his apartment, sexuality, and the Kaposi's sarcoma lesions during his battle with HIV/AIDS. There is some correspondence between Deutsch and Chesley about his plays, personal matters, and gay rights issues. The collection also reflects Chesley's plan to create a gay theater foundation, and his participation in the development of the 3-Dollar Bill Theater. Additionally, there are materials related to a memorial celebration of Chesley's life and work.

The majority of the materials in this collection are sexually explicit.

**Arrangement:** The collection is arranged by subject or format.

## **Key Terms**

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Clippings (information artifacts)  
Correspondence  
Newspapers  
Periodicals  
Posters  
Scripts

### **Occupations**

Gay dramatists  
Playwrights

### **Subjects**

Gay rights  
Gay theater  
Homosexuality and theater  
Homosexuality in the theater  
Sex in the theater

## Container List

### Addresses, Articles, and Interviews

- b. 1 f. 1-2 1980-1990
- b. 1 f. 3 1984-1991
- b. 1 f. 4 1987-1993
- b. 11 f. 2-3 1991
- b. 1 f. 5-6 Epidemic, Center Stage 1987
- origsr.221011 "Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool of the Right" 1987  
With introduction.  
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origsr.221010 "Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool of the Right" 1987  
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.220999 Group for Gay Awareness Reading 1987  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.221000 Out and About Interview 1990  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

- b. 1 f. 7 Calendar 1991
- b. 1 f. 8 Contracts 1990-2005

### Correspondence

- b. 2 f. 1 Chesley, Robert and Deutsch, Nicholas 1983-1987
- b. 2 f. 2-3 Play Inquiries 1990s
- b. 2 f. 4 The Dramatists Guild 1982
- b. 2 f. 5 Gay Theater Foundation and 3-Dollar Bill Theater 1988-1990
- b. 2 f. 6 Memorabilia 1978-1989
- b. 2 f. 7 Notes 1990

### Obituaries, Memorial Celebrations, and Tributes

- b. 2 f. 8-9 1990-1994
- origvid.221001 Benefit #2 1996  
Re: Sal Monetti.  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.221002 Hold -- Phillips, Peter 1995  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.221003 Robert Chesley: A Celebration of His Life and Work 1991  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.221004 Tell Me a Story -- Maclean, David 1990  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

- b. 3 f. 1-3 Photographs 1980s-1991

### Plays and other Writings

- b. 3 f. 4 *Beatitudes* 1985
- b. 3 f. 5 *Cassandra: The Marriage Closet* 1987
- b. 3 f. 6-7 *Come Again* 1980s
- b. 3 f. 8 *Daffodils* 1981
- Dog Plays*

Plays and other Writings (cont.)

Dog Plays (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 9 Manuscript 1980s
- b. 4 f. 1 Script 1980s
- b. 4 f. 2-7 Production Materials 1990-1997
- b. 4 f. 8 *For the Kids* 1981
- b. 4 f. 9-10 *Fuck the Holidays: One Act Plays* 1979-1982
- b. 4 f. 11 *Gentle Annie* 1980
- b. 4 f. 12 *Hell, I Love You* 1981
- b. 4 f. 13 *If a Man Will but Take Me by the Hand* 1980s  
*Jerker or the Helping Hand*
- b. 4 f. 14 Manuscript 1985
- b. 5 f. 1 Script 1985
- b. 5 f. 2 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Censorship 1986-1987  
Clippings.
- b. 5 f. 3-4 Film Adaptation 1990
- origvid.221006 Film Adaptation 1991  
Out and About Pictures; The Pride Playhouse Collection Volume 1.  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.  
Production Materials
- b. 5 f. 5-15 1980s-1998
- b. 6 f. 1-15 1986-1998
- origvid.221007 Boston, Massachusetts Production 1993  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origvid.221008 New York, New York Production 1987  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.  
Realia 1980s  
T-Shirts  
Located in the \*T-Cabinet. To view, email theatre@nypl.org to make an appointment.  
Sound Cue Materials
- origsr.221014 1980s  
Master copy of all cues.  
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origsr.221013 1980s  
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- origsr.221012 Phone Disconnect Notice 1980s  
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- b. 7 f. 1 Publication 1987-1989
- b. 7 f. 2-3 Publicity 1984-1991
- b. 7 f. 4 "La Ronde" 1984  
Short story.
- b. 7 f. 5 *Madeleine de Lucien* 1985  
Translation.
- b. 7 f. 6-7 *Miscellaneous One Act Plays* 1981-1984
- b. 7 f. 8 Music  
"Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts."  
*Night Sweat*

Plays and other Writings (cont.)

Night Sweat (cont.)

- b. 7 f. 9 Script 1984
- b. 7 f. 10 Contact Sheets 1987
- b. 7 f. 11-12 Production Materials 1984-1985
- b. 8 f. 1-5 Production Materials 1985-1993
- b. 8 f. 6 Publicity 1984-1985
- b. 8 f. 7 *Nocturnes* 1983
- b. 8 f. 8 One Acts 1981-1982, 1991-1994
- b. 8 f. 9-10 *Pigman* 1986
- Private Theatricals*
- b. 9 f. 1 Manuscript 1980s
- b. 9 f. 2-3 Script 1990s
- b. 9 f. 4 Production Materials 1992-1993
- b. 9 f. 5 *Stories and Fairy Tales* 1982-1983
- Stray Dog Story*
- b. 9 f. 6 Manuscript 1980s
- b. 9 f. 7-9 Script 1982
- b. 9 f. 10 Artwork 1980s
- b. 10 f. 1-3 Production Materials 1982-1998, 2001
- origvid.221009 Los Angeles, California Production 1990s  
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- b. 10 f. 4 *(Untitled) a libretto* 1982
- b. 11 f. 1 Posters 1980s-1991