



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Merle Debuskey papers

1952-1996

*T-Mss 1996-026

Compiled by Robyn Hjermsstad, 2013

Summary

Creator: Debuskey, Merle

Title: Merle Debuskey papers

Date: 1952-1996

Size: 34.63 linear feet (80 boxes)

Source: Donated by Merle DeBuskey, 1996.

Abstract: Merle Debuskey (b. 1923) is an American theater press representative. From 1948 until his retirement in 1996, he publicized over 500 theatrical productions. He was the first and longest-lasting press agent for Joseph Papp and the Public Theater, from its inception in the 1950s until 1985. The Merle Debuskey papers date from 1952 to 1996 and document Debuskey's work as a press representative for Broadway and Off-Broadway theater productions, and his work with The Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers (ATPAM). The collection holds publicity files for theater productions and actors; correspondence and press-related material relating to Joseph Papp and the Public Theater; administrative files relating to the Tony Awards and ATPAM; and scripts.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult: <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Inquiries regarding audio-visual materials in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Division (theatrediv@nypl.org).

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York Public Library.

Processing note: Compiled by Robyn Hjermsstad, 2013 Original order was maintained when apparent. A limited amount of loose material was placed into folders.

Creator History

Merle Debuskey (b.1923) is an American theater press representative. From 1948 until his retirement in 1996, he publicized over 500 theatrical productions, approximately 300 of which were on Broadway.

Debuskey became acquainted with the theater world in the 1940s while attending public relations classes under Edward Bernays at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He soon joined The Interplayers, a theater cooperative that put on four shows at the Provincetown Playhouse in 1948. Among the early productions he publicized were *The Infernal Machine* (1948), *Too Many Thumbs* (1949), and *Earth Spirit* (1950).

Debuskey went on to work publicity for hundreds of productions on Broadway, including *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), *Hair* (1967), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), and *A Chorus Line* (1975). His Off-Broadway publicity was also extensive. He was the first and longest lasting press agent for Joseph Papp and the Public Theater, from its inception in the 1950s until 1985. He was the first press agent for Lincoln Theater, and handled the press for the Circle in the Square Theatre for several years. Debuskey also worked in film and television.

Debuskey became a member of the Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers (ATPAM) in 1950. He served as chairman of the New York Press Agents chapter from 1956 to 1963; as vice-president from 1964 to 1967, and was ATPAM President from 1967 to 1994.

Robert Simonson's biography, *The Gentleman Press Agent: Fifty Years in the Theatrical Trenches with Merle Debuskey*, was published in 2010.

Scope and Content Note

The Merle Debuskey papers date from 1952 to 1996 and document Debuskey's work as a press representative for Broadway and Off-Broadway theater productions, and his work with The Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers (ATPAM). The collection holds publicity files for theater productions and actors; correspondence and press-related material relating to Joseph Papp and the Public Theater; administrative files relating to the Tony Awards and ATPAM; and scripts. Over 70 theatrical productions are represented in this collection through the production publicity files. Additional productions are represented through the actor files and scripts.

Publicity files are comprised of actor files and production files. The actor files contain biographical information and press kits for actors represented by Debuskey. The files vary in terms of content and volume, but typically contain press releases, head shots, reviews, and correspondence relating to setting up interviews. A wide range of both Broadway and Off-Broadway actors are represented. A file for Dick Kallman, the actor who played Finch in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* in its North American tour, contains photographs of the actor, press quotations, articles, and drafts of a press release on the actor. A file on boxer and stage actor Philip Kenneally documents his role as a chauffer in Jean Anouilh's *Traveller Without Luggage*. The file also contains photographs of Kenneally in his boxing garb.

Production files make up the bulk of this collection. Researchers interested in Debuskey's work with

The New York Shakespeare Festival should consult material relating specifically to Joseph Papp and the Public Theater in addition to the production and actor publicity files. The bulk of the production files date between the 1960s and 1970s and contain press-related material concerning Broadway and Off-Broadway shows. Debuskey frequently worked on several productions at a time, and the production files herein demonstrate the nature of his work. Files for multiple productions or projects Debuskey worked on in a given time period may be intermixed, but in general, files for a single production are together. Among the best represented productions in this collection are *The Investigation* (1966), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), *A Chorus Line* (1975-1990), *Angel* (1978), *House of Blue Leaves* (1986), and *Sacrilege* (1995). Productions put on by the New York Shakespeare Festival are present and include *Dance Wi' Me* (1971), *The Black Terror* (1971), *Candide* (1971), *Blood* (1971), and *Hamlet* (1972), among others. Revues put on by The Second City at the Square East Theatre are well represented. Other productions include *Nobody Loves an Albatross* (1963), *Absence of a Cello* (1964), *Sticks and Bones* (1971), *Thieves* (1974), and *The Poison Tree* (1975), among several others. The extent to which each production is represented varies. In most cases, multiple files for a single production are present and reflect the different aspects of press relations, such as program planning, media correspondence, advertising, and reviews. Typically, productions are represented with news clippings, press releases, and photographs of productions. Files may also contain correspondence; press lists and seating charts relating to opening night ticket requests; biographical information on the cast and crew; program drafts; slides; and hand drawn or printed logos. Files for *A Chorus Line* are extensive and document the show's success towards the end of its run in the late 1980s to the 1990s. Material relating to advertising is present in most of the production files. These files generally contain advertising invoices, media schedules for television and radio, and scripts for live announcements of the production. Correspondence with actors typically relates to setting up interviews. Hand drawn logos for programs and advertisements for *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Hair*, among others, are present.

Material relating to Debuskey's publicity work outside of theater is also represented in the production files. Documents relating to Interama (1959-1960), a planned international exposition, and his work for the television *Series Night of 100 Stars* (1989-1990) are present. The Interama files include correspondence from Debuskey and frequent colleague Seymour Krawitz to Nicholas Reisini relating to the exposition's press coverage. A limited amount of photographs are present and document the potential site of the exposition in Angers, France; and of the inflation of the dome theater that was to be used for the exposition. Files for *Night of 100 Stars* contain press kits and information relating to a tie-in promotion with the 1990 Diamonds International Awards.

Materials reflecting the activities of Joseph Papp and the Public Theater during the 1960s and 1970s are present in this collection. Copies of Papp's correspondence relate to the publicity of his productions as well as administrative activities at The Public Theater and the New York Shakespeare Festival. Many of the letters are attached with memorandums to Debuskey. Correspondence, clippings, and press releases document the successes and challenges of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Files for the Astor Library building in New York City are present and document the Public Theater's purchase of the building, the building's history, and proposed theater design plans. The success of the Public Theater's first production in the Astor building, *Hair*, is represented through correspondence, clippings, and press releases. Audience surveys and quotations from media relating to *Hair* are also present. Papp's correspondence with audience members and theater critics reflect Papp's deep involvement in every aspect of the production. Reviews and correspondence relating to Papp's 1967 production of *Hamlet* demonstrate the show's mixed response from educators, theater critics, and the general public. Correspondence with New York Times editor Arthur Gelb demonstrates Papp's close professional and personal relationship with Gelb. Correspondence between Joseph Papp and Jimmy Carter documents the efforts the two made in creating a performing arts task force just before Carter was elected President.

Administrative files in this collection relate to Debuskey's work with ATPAM and with the Tony Awards. The ATPAM files in this collection date from 1959 to 1980. Typically material relates to the administrative activities of board members. Other document types include meeting notices, agendas, and minutes; copies of union by-laws; apprenticeship agreements; and union handbooks. Correspondence documents contract negotiations regarding union employment, applicant statuses, and matters regarding apprenticeships. Also included in the ATPAM files are two transcripts of interviews with Debuskey. The transcript of an interview with Anne Hecht (1993) for the American Jewish Committee, Oral History Library is a general interview documenting Debuskey's life and career. Debuskey's experiences with Joseph Papp are documented through a transcript of an interview given by Kenneth Turan (1987).

Files covering the Tony awards date from 1960 to 1993. Some award years are represented through multiple files, while others are less extensive. Most files contain newspaper clippings and announcements of the awards. More comprehensive files may hold programs, correspondence, and memorandums. The memorandums document communications between members of The League of New York Theatres and Producers (now known as The Broadway League), general managers, and press agents. The memorandums are typically attached to documents outlining the rules and regulations of the awards. Correspondence frequently addresses the eligibility and nomination committees for the Tony Awards, in addition to date notifications for meetings, and voter lists. Debuskey also kept track of Broadway season theater statistics as a whole, and maintained files along with the Tony Award files. These files generally contain newspaper clippings and reviews that outline the success of a given season.

The scripts in this collection date from the 1970s to the 1990s and are mostly for productions put on by Lincoln Center. While some of the scripts are final copies, many of them are drafts or stage managers' versions. Production titles include *The Sisters Rosenweig* (1992), *Hello Again* (1993), *Twelve Dreams* (1995), and *A Fair Country* (1996), among others. A costume plot with photocopies of drawings is included for the production of *Carousel*. Multiple versions of scripts are present for *The Sisters Rosenweig* (1992) and *Happgood* (1994).

The collection holds audio-visual material. A recording of *Comedy Tonight* (1994) at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater is present. Also included are newsreels and recordings of *A Chorus Line* (1975-1990), *Dreamgirls* (1981), and *Sacrilege* (1995), among others. This audio-visual material will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Arrangement: Actor publicity files are arranged alphabetically by actor's last name; scripts are arranged alphabetically by title. All other material in this collection is arranged chronologically.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Clippings (information artifacts)
Correspondence
Logos
Photographs
Press releases
Scripts (documents)

Occupations

Press agents

Subjects

Theater -- 20th century

Theater -- New York (State) -- New York

Theater -- Public relations

Tony Awards

Names

Papp, Joseph

New York Shakespeare Festival Productions

New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater

Container List

Publicity Files

Actors

- b. 1 f. 1-12 A - B 1966-1976, 1990
- b. 2 f. 1-17 C - F 1962-1986
- b. 3 f. 1-13 F - G 1962-1978
- b. 4 f. 1-21 G - H 1964-1981
- b. 5 f. 1-19 J - L 1962-1976
- b. 6 f. 1-16 L - M 1963-1974
- b. 7 f. 1-22 M - R 1965-1980
- b. 8 f. 1-17 S 1961-1979
- b. 9 f. 1-14 S - V 1963-1977
- b. 10 f. 1-16 V - Z 1959-1981

Productions

- b. 11 f. 1-10 1952-1965
- b. 12 f. 1-13 1953-1962
- b. 13 f. 1-7 1959-1963
- b. 14 f. 1-6 1960-1963
- b. 80 f. 1-6 1961-1962
- b. 18 f. 1-11 1961-1966
- b. 21 f. 1-9 1962-1966
- b. 15 f. 1-8 1963-1964
- b. 16 f. 1-7 1963-1965
- b. 17 f. 1-10 1963-1966
- b. 19 f. 1-6 1964-1965
- b. 20 f. 1-18 1964-1967
- b. 22 f. 1-20 1964-1967
- b. 23 f. 1-17 1966
- b. 24 f. 1-13 1966-1967
- b. 25 f. 1-20 1967
- b. 26 f. 1-20 1967
- b. 77 f. 1-2 1960s-1970s
hand drawn logos and posters
- b. 78 1960s-1970s (2 items)
hand drawn logos and posters
- b. 27 f. 1-11 1970-1971
- b. 28 f. 1-11 1970-1990
- b. 29 f. 1-14 1971
- b. 30 f. 1-19 1971
- b. 31 f. 1-9 1971-1972
- b. 32 f. 1-8 1971-1972

Publicity Files (cont.)
Productions (cont.)

b. 33 f. 1-11	1971-1973
b. 34 f. 1-20	1971-1973
b. 35 f. 1-13	1971-1974
b. 36 f. 1-8	1971-1975
b. 37 f. 1-9	1972-1975
b. 45 f. 1-8	1974-1978
b. 38 f. 1-7	1975-1976
b. 39 f. 1-12	1975-1990
b. 40 f. 1-7	1975-1990
b. 41 f. 1-6	1975-1990
b. 42 f. 1-5	1975-1976
b. 43 f. 1-6	1976-1978
b. 44 f. 1-10	1976-1978
b. 46 f. 1-7	1981-1990
b. 47 f. 1-11	1982-1993
b. 49 f. 1-5	1982-1993
b. 48 f. 1-11	1985-1990
b. 50 f. 1-11	1988-1989
b. 51 f. 1-8	1989
b. 79	1989-1995
	slides
b. 52 f. 1-10	1990
b. 53 f. 1-12	1990
b. 54 f. 1-12	1992-1994
b. 55 f. 1-14	1992-1995
b. 57 f. 1-9	1994-1995
b. 58 f. 1-10	1995
b. 59 f. 1-10	1995
b. 60 f. 1-14	1995-1996

Public Theater and Joseph Papp

b. 61 f. 1-12	1964-1972
b. 62 f. 1-10	1965-1980
b. 63 f. 1-10	1967-1978
b. 64 f. 1-10	1972-1982
b. 65 f. 1-4	1993

Administrative Files

ATPAM

b. 66 f. 1-10	1959-1980
b. 67 f. 1-9	1960-1980
b. 37 f. 10-13	1987, 1993

Merle Debuskey interview transcriptions.

Administrative Files (cont.)

Tony Awards

- b. 68 f. 1-9 1960-1975
- b. 69 f. 1-23 1960-1994
- b. 70 f. 1-9 1976-1985
- b. 71 f. 1-11 1983-1993

Scripts

- b. 72 f. 1-5 A-G 1979-1996
Contains costume plot for Carousel.
- b. 73 f. 1-5 G-H, M 1989, 1994
- b. 74 f. 1-4 M-P 1980-1995
- b. 75 f. 1-5 P-S 1983-1994
- b. 76 f. 1-4 S-V 1990-1995