



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

John Simon papers

1892-2011

*T-Mss 2007-014

Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2014

Summary

Creator: Simon, John Ivan

Title: John Simon papers

Date: 1892-2011

Size: 18.59 linear feet (45 boxes, 2 oversized folders)

Source: Donated by John Simon, 2007, 2010, and 2011.

Abstract: John Simon is an American theater, film, and literary critic. The John Simon papers contain initial and final drafts of his criticism, dating from the 1960s to 2011, as well as correspondence and clippings documenting responses to his work from the press, the public, colleagues, and individuals whose work he was reviewing. The collection also contains material related to Simon's education, personal life, and family. The earliest materials in the collection are family photographs, dating as early as 1892.

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 and video recordings in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Division (theatre@nypl.org). Audio and video recordings will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Conditions Governing Use: The author/creator retains copyright of materials. For information on obtaining permission to publish, contact the Theatre Division at theatre@nypl.org.

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Processing note: Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2014

Creator History

John Ivan Simon is an American theater, film, and literary critic. He was born in Yugoslavia in 1925. His father, Joseph Simmon, was Hungarian and his mother, Margaret Simmon (née Révész), was a member of Serbia's ethnic Hungarian minority.

John Simon came to the United States at the age of fifteen. He received his bachelor's degree in 1946 from Harvard University, and went on to earn a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Harvard in 1959. Simon was head of the Harvard Radio Workshop, a group that wrote and produced radio plays. During the 1950s, he also taught at Harvard and other universities.

Simon wrote and translated poetry, and was published in journals such as the *Paris Review* and the *Quarterly Review of Literature* in the 1950s.

From 1959 to 1961, Simon was the assistant editor of and a contributor to *The Mid-Century*, a journal published by the Mid-Century Book Society. He began working regularly as a critic in the 1960s. He wrote primarily on theater and film, but also on music, literature, language, and other cultural topics. In 1963, he published *Acid Test*, his first volume of criticism. He was drama critic for the *Hudson Review* from 1960 to 1980, for *Theatre Arts* in 1962, and for *Commonweal* from 1967 to 1968. In 1968, he became the theater critic for *New York* magazine, a position he held until 2005. He wrote film criticism for *National Review* from 1978 to 2001, wrote on theater and film for *The New Leader*, wrote book reviews for *The New Criterion*, and wrote a regular column on language for *Esquire* in the late 1970s. From 2005 to 2010, he was the theater critic for *Bloomberg News*.

Simon's opinions, and the way in which he expressed them, often occasioned controversy. In 1969, the New York Drama Critics Circle voted to deny him membership (Simon later became a member). In 1977, the League of New York Theatres and Producers removed Simon from their list of suggested first night press, citing his use of profanity on a television talk show and his tendency to harshly critique the physical appearance of actors in his reviews. His prescriptive approach to language drew strong support and strong criticism from writers, readers, and linguists.

Simon has received awards for his work as a critic, including the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism in 1970.

In 1992, Simon married Patricia Hoag. He lives in Mount Vernon, New York.

Scope and Content Note

The John Simon papers (1892-2011) document Simon's career as a writer and critic, and his education, personal life, and family history. The collection contains his writings, including reviews, lectures, poetry, and notes; correspondence; professional papers such as calendars, contracts, and lecture programs; writings about Simon; personal and family papers; materials from Simon's education; and photographs of Simon and his colleagues, friends, and family. Correspondence and clippings document the reception of Simon's work by readers, playwrights, screenwriters, actors, directors, and other critics. Most of the material is in English, but the collection also includes material in German and Hungarian.

Writings consist primarily of reviews, essays, and lectures on the arts and cultural topics, dating from the 1960s to 2011. Simon wrote his articles by hand before typing them, and the collection includes his handwritten drafts with minor edits. Writings also include typescripts of articles and essays; transcripts

and texts of lectures and papers; and clippings and printouts of his work from *New York, Esquire, The New Criterion, Bloomberg News*, and other publications. Most of the writings are arranged by subject, such as "theater," "film," and "music." There are also notebooks containing handwritten reviews and essays from 2007 to 2011. Some loose notes are also present. There are extensive notes from books that Simon was reading, some of which he reviewed. Simon's poetry dates from the 1940s to the 2000s, and includes his translations of poems by others.

Correspondence comprises letters to Simon from friends, colleagues, editors, and readers, and a small number of letters by Simon. Incoming letters contain reactions to specific reviews, discussions of films and plays and their critical reception, and responses to Simon's ideas about language and culture. Simon's outgoing letters are mostly responses to criticism of his work. Many of these can be found in a file labeled "Letters by John Simon," but copies of some of his outgoing letters can also be found scattered throughout the correspondence files. His letters to his parents can be found in his personal and family papers. Letters from readers date from the 1960s to the 2000s, and include printouts of emails and letters to the editor that were forwarded or copied to Simon. These letters often touch on contemporary social issues and cultural trends. Files labeled "Controversy" and "Contretemps" contain letters and clippings regarding various public debates and disagreements involving Simon, mostly dating to the 1970s; they also include a file concerning Simon's 1991 review of Norman Mailer's book, *Harlot's Ghost*. Unsorted correspondence files contain personal and professional letters from a range of Simon's friends, colleagues, and readers.

Simon's frequent correspondents include actor Keith Baxter; author James Dickey; composer Ned Rorem; and critics Dwight Macdonald, Frank Noack, Digby Ricci, and Jörg von Uthmann. There are a number of letters, mostly in German, from Leni Riefenstahl; these were written in the 1990s and discuss Riefenstahl's health, her travels, her underwater film project, and a potential film adaptation of her memoirs. The correspondence includes enclosures sent to Simon by his correspondents, such as clippings sent to him by fellow critics, sheet music sent by Rorem, and photographs sent by Riefenstahl.

The collection contains miscellaneous professional papers, including professional biographies, publicity materials, programs for Simon's public appearances, press passes, calendars, and teaching materials. The calendars are from August 2006 to July 2009 and show the dates of films and performances, and the dates his reviews were posted online. Publicity materials are for Simon's lectures and writings. There is a small amount of material from drama courses that Simon taught, comprising notes and a syllabus. Professional papers also include a 1990 "Dickie" Award for sexist film criticism from the National Women's Theatre, and a roll of paper printed with pictures of John Simon, intended to look like toilet paper.

Writings about John Simon include copies of articles about or referring to Simon; published letters to the editor regarding his articles; interviews with Simon; reviews of his books; student papers written about Simon; and printouts of internet comments, among other materials. Simon's personal and family papers include his correspondence with his parents and official documents such as passports, citizenship papers, and naturalization papers. Correspondence is in Hungarian and dates mostly to the 1940s. A 1940 scrapbook containing images of movie stars is also present.

Simon's education at Harvard from 1942 to 1959 is represented by his school papers on literature, a copy of his dissertation, and notes from his courses. There is also material concerning Simon's involvement in theatrical productions as a writer, actor, or director while he was at Harvard, including a notebook documenting meetings and productions of the Harvard Radio Workshop. Yearbooks from Simon's junior and senior years of high school are also present.

Photographs in the collection include publicity photographs of John Simon, photographs of Simon at

various professional events, and photographs of his family. The earliest materials in the collection are photographs from Simon's family dating from 1892 to the 1920s, depicting his parents and other ancestors.

The collection also contains audio and video recordings of Simon's television appearances and public speaking, mostly from the 1980s to the 2000s. Inquiries regarding audio and video recordings in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Division (theatre@nypl.org). Audio and video recordings will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Arrangement: The collection is arranged in seven categories: Writings, Correspondence, Professional Papers, Writings about John Simon, Personal and Family Papers, Education, and Photographs.

Key Terms

Subjects

Books -- Reviews
Dramatic criticism
Film criticism
Motion pictures -- Reviews
Theater -- Reviews

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Manuscripts for publication
Photographs

Occupations

Film critics
Theater critics

Container List

Writings by Simon

Essays, Lectures, and Reviews

Clippings and drafts.

- b. 1 f. 1-11 Theater 1960s-2010
- b. 2 f. 1-11 Book Reviews and Literature 1962-2010
- b. 3 f. 1-4 Film 1960s-2000s
- b. 3 f. 5-10 Opera and Music 1960s-2000s
- b. 4 f. 1-17 Poetry, Language, Art, Criticism, and Miscellany 1960s-2000s

Notebooks and Loose Notes

Drafts and miscellaneous notes.

- b. 5 f. 1-9 2007-2009
- b. 6 f. 1-9 2009-2011
- b. 7 f. 1-9 1988-2000s
- b. 8 f. 1-11 Poems 1942-2000s

Correspondence

- b. 20 f. 1 Letters by John Simon 1959-2010
Letters by Simon can also be found throughout the correspondence files.
- b. 19 f. 4-7 Business Correspondence 1949-2004
- b. 20 f. 2-11 Controversies and Contretemps 1964-1991

Friends, Celebrities, and Other Prominent Professionals

- b. 9 f. 1-6 A - B 1960-2001
- b. 10 f. 1-8 B - D 1949, 1961-2004
- b. 11 f. 1-7 E - H 1944-2009
- b. 12 f. 1-8 H - J 1964-1998
- b. 13 f. 1-8 K - M 1957-2004
- b. 14 f. 1-6 M 1962-1996
- b. 15 f. 1-7 M - O 1971-2003
- b. 16 f. 1-7 P - R 1960-2003
- b. 17 f. 1-7 R - S 1957-2004
- b. 18 f. 1-9 S - V 1945-2000s
- b. 19 f. 1-3 W - Z 1947-1995

Readers

- b. 21 f. 1-7 1960s-1980s
- b. 22 f. 1-8 1970-1976
- b. 23 f. 1-6 1977-1978
- b. 24 f. 1-10 1977-1981
- b. 25 f. 1-6 1982-2000s

Correspondence (cont.)

Unsorted

Includes letters from friends, colleagues, editors, and readers.

- b. 26 f. 1-8 1940-1959
- b. 27 f. 1-7 1950s-2000s
- b. 28 f. 1-7 1958-1975
- b. 29 f. 1-6 1960-1979
- b. 30 f. 1-6 1964-1999
- b. 31 f. 1-6 1980-2011
- b. 32 f. 1-7 1991-2009
- b. 33 f. 1-6 1994-2011
- b. 25 f. 7-9 2005-2010

Professional Papers

- b. 34 f. 1-10 1961-2010
Includes biographies, programs, advertisements, a day planner, contracts, and teaching materials.
 - o. 1 Calendars 2006-2009
C12 Dwr. #24
 - o. 2 Adelphi University Honorary Degree 1996
C12 Dwr. #24
 - o. 2 De Mandeville Award for Excellence 1971
C12 Dwr. #24
- b. 44 Dickie Award 1990
Location: T-Cabinet. May be viewed by appointment only. For assistance, contact the Theatre Division (theatre@nypl.org).
- b. 43 f. 1 Poster for Lecture, "The Decline of Moral Passion in Contemporary Films"
undated
- b. 45 Roll of Paper Printed with Image of John Simon undated
Location: T-Cabinet. May be viewed by appointment only. For assistance, contact the Theatre Division (theatre@nypl.org).

Writings about Simon

- b. 35 f. 1-10 Articles and Clippings 1962-2008
- b. 36 f. 1-9 Book Reviews 1963-1989
- b. 34 f. 11-13 Interviews with Simon 1970-1996
- b. 36 f. 10-11 School Papers 1971-1981
 - b. 36 f. 12 Companion Dictionary for John Simon Reviews; Parody Movie Trailer Script
1971, 1985
- b. 36 f. 13-15 Personal and Family Papers 1938-1990
 - b. 37 f. 1 Movie Star Scrapbook 1940

Education

- b. 37 f. 2-5 Yearbooks; Class Notes 1941-1943, 1946
- b. 38 f. 1-4 Harvard Radio Workshop; Miscellany 1942-1958
- b. 40 f. 1-2 School Papers 1940s
- b. 38 f. 5-10 School Papers 1940s
 - b. 43 f. 2 Diploma 1948

Education (cont.)

- b. 39 f. 1-6 *The Prose Poem: A Study of a Genre in Nineteenth-Century European Literature* circa 1959
Ph.D. thesis

Photographs

- b. 40 f. 3-8 1892-1989
b. 41 f. 1-9 1908-2000s
b. 43 f. 3-11 1930s-1940s, 1960s
b. 42 f. 1-7 1940s-2003