



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Philip Van Doren Stern-Elmer Harris correspondence

1939-1940

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Summary

Creator: Stern, Philip Van Doren, 1900-1984

Title: Philip Van Doren Stern-Elmer Harris correspondence

Date: 1939-1940

Size: (1 portfolio)

Abstract: Philip Van Doren Stern (1900-1984) was a historian, social critic, editor and author, best known for the short story which became the source for the 1946 film IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. Elmer Harris (1878-1966) was a playwright and screenwriter, best known for his play and film JOHNNY BELINDA. The correspondence between Elmer Harris and Philip Van Doren Stern dates from April 1939 to January 1940, and concerns Harris' stage adaptation of Stern's book THE MAN WHO KILLED LINCOLN, concerning the last days of John Wilkes Booth. Also taking part in the correspondence was producer Joseph M. Gaites (1873-1940), who initiated the theatrical project and selected Harris as adaptor, and who occasionally wrote to Stern with updates on the production, and on the Hollywood producers said to be interested in motion picture rights to the play. The Stern-Harris letters discuss Booth and the historical facts concerning Abraham Lincoln's assassination, the portrayal of Booth in Stern's book and in the play, and matters concerning the production such as scenery and possible casting choices. Harris' outline which details the play scene by scene is included with an early letter. The play eventually premiered at the Longacre Theatre on January 17, 1940, but closed three days later after only five performances. No film version was made.

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>

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Creator History

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short story which became the source for the 1946 film IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. Elmer Harris (1878-1966) was a playwright and screenwriter, best known for his play and film JOHNNY BELINDA.

Scope and Content Note

The correspondence between Elmer Harris and Philip Van Doren Stern dates from April 1939 to January 1940, and concerns Harris' stage adaptation of Stern's book THE MAN WHO KILLED LINCOLN, concerning the last days of John Wilkes Booth. Also taking part in the correspondence was producer Joseph M. Gaites (1873-1940), who initiated the theatrical project and selected Harris as adaptor, and who occasionally wrote to Stern with updates on the production, and on the Hollywood producers said to be interested in motion picture rights to the play. The Stern-Harris letters discuss Booth and the historical facts concerning Abraham Lincoln's assassination, the portrayal of Booth in Stern's book and in the play, and matters concerning the production such as scenery and possible casting choices. Harris' outline which details the play scene by scene is included with an early letter. The play eventually premiered at the Longacre Theatre on January 17, 1940, but closed three days later after only five performances. No film version was made.

Key Terms

Subjects

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

Names

Stern, Philip Van Doren, 1900-1984

Booth, John Wilkes, 1838-1865

Gaites, Joseph M

Harris, Elmer, 1878-1966

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865