



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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<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

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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
"Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool of the Right" 1987
origsr.221011
With introduction.

Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

"Erotic Liberation and Censorship: Prudery as a Tool of the Right" 1987
origsr.221010
Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Group for Gay Awareness Reading 1987
origvid.220999
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Out and About Interview 1990
origvid.221000
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
Benefit #2 1996
origvid.221001
Re: Sal Monetti.

Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Hold -- Phillips, Peter 1995
origvid.221002
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Obituaries, Memorial Celebrations, and Tributes (cont.)

Robert Chesley: A Celebration of His Life and Work 1991

origvid.221003

Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Tell Me a Story -- Maclean, David 1990

origvid.221004

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

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

Film Adaptation 1991

origvid.221006

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

Boston, Massachusetts Production 1993

origvid.221007

Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

New York, New York Production 1987

origvid.221008

Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Plays and other Writings (cont.)
Jerker or the Helping Hand (cont.)
Production Materials (cont.)

Realia 1980s
T-Shirts

Located in the *T-Cabinet. To view, email theatre@nypl.org to make an appointment.

Sound Cue Materials

1980s
origsr.221014
Master copy of all cues.

Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

1980s
origsr.221013

Sound recording available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.

Phone Disconnect Notice 1980s
origsr.221012

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

- 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

Plays and other Writings (cont.)
Stray Dog Story (cont.)

- b. 9 f. 10 Artwork 1980s
- b. 10 f. 1-3 Production Materials 1982-1998, 2001
Los Angeles, California Production 1990s
origvid.221009
Video available by appointment only, email theatre@nypl.org.
- b. 10 f. 4 *(Untitled) a libretto* 1982
- b. 11 f. 1 Posters 1980s-1991