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Guide to the

Betty Comden papers

1929-2004

*T-MSS 2010-107

Compiled by Diana Bertolini, August 2011

Summary

Creator: Comden, Betty

Title: Betty Comden papers, 1929-2004

Size: 8.64 linear feet (23 boxes)

Source: Donated by the Estate of Betty Comden Kyle in 2006.

Abstract: Betty Comden was an American lyricist, playwright, screenwriter and actress working on stage and screen productions from the late 1930s through the 1990s. This collection is the personal and professional papers of Betty Comden. It consists mainly of scripts and scores.

Access: Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required.

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Preferred citation: Betty Comden Papers, 1929-2004, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.

Processing note

This collection divided itself naturally into two series. In the first series, Production Files are listed alphabetically by title. Due to the small size of the collection the productions are not broken up by genre. There are so few personal items that no arrangement beyond an alphabetical list of the items was necessary.

Related collections

Adolph Green Papers, 1944-2002, Billy Rose Theatre Division. Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library

Betty Comden Scores, 1938-1975. Music Division

Comden and Green Papers, 1933-2003. Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library

Creator history

Betty Comden was an American lyricist, playwright, screenwriter and actress working on stage and screen productions from the late 1930s through the 1990s. She was born Elizabeth Cohen on May 3, 1917 in Brooklyn, NY and attended New York University, where she studied drama, receiving a Bachelor of Science degree from the School of Education in 1938. Comden began her theatrical career writing and performing satirical sketches with the nightclub act, The Revuers, along with Judy Holliday and Adolph Green, who became her lifelong writing partner. The Revuers played at the Village Vanguard and the Rainbow Room in the late 1930s and made regular appearances on radio and one brief appearance in the Fox film, *Greenwich Village* (1944). The team of Comden and Green scored a hit with their Broadway debut, *On the Town* (1944), for which they provided the book and lyrics to Leonard Bernstein's score, as well as appearing in the original Broadway cast.

After their second show, *Billion Dollar Baby* (1945), written with composer Morton Gould, Comden and Green signed with Metro-Goldwin-Mayer and began working for the Arthur Freed Unit. Their first project was a screenplay and additional lyrics for *Good News* (1947). They went on to write original screenplays for several classic movie musicals, including *Singin' In The Rain* (1952), *The Bandwagon* (1953), *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955) and the final film of the legendary partnership between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949). They also adapted the screenplay and provided lyrics to new songs for their own *On The Town* (1949).

In the early 1950s, Comden and Green resumed their Broadway career with the revue *Two on the Aisle* (1951), the first of many collaborations with their most frequent composer, Jule Styne. Their next project, *Wonderful Town* (1953), reunited them with Leonard Bernstein and won the Tony Award as Best Musical. Their next seven Broadway musicals were collaborations with Styne, including additional songs for *Peter Pan* (1954) and full scores (with Styne) and scripts for *Say, Darling* (1958), *Do-Re-Mi* (1960), *Subways Are for Sleeping* (1961), *Fade Out-Fade In* (1964) and Best Musical Tony Award winner, *Hallelujah, Baby!* (1968). The most successful show from their collaboration with Styne was *Bells Are Ringing* (1956), a vehicle for Comden and Green's old friend, Judy Holliday, now an Academy Award winning actress.

During this period of high productivity on Broadway, Comden and Green also continued to work on film projects, adapting *Bells Are Ringing* for the screen in 1960 and scripting the 1958 screen adaptation of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's play *Auntie Mame*, which starred Rosalind Russell. Their last produced film was the comedy with songs, *What A Way To Go!* (1964), but they continued to work on screenplays for the rest of their careers. Comden and Green also continued performing in 1959, with the first version of their successful revue, *A Party With Betty Comden and Adolph Green*, which they performed several times on Broadway and around the country over the following thirty years.

In 1970, Comden and Green provided the book for Charles Strouse and Lee Adams' score for *Applause*, a musical version of the classic film, *All About Eve*, (1950) which won the Tony Award for Best Musical. Another Comden and Green show won the Tony later in the decade: *On The Twentieth Century* in 1978, which also won them and their composer, Cy Coleman, the Tony for Best Score. Comden and Green's next project was a departure from the witty, urbane style that had characterized their previous work when they tackled nineteenth century feminism in a collaboration with composer Larry Grossman and director Harold Prince. *A Doll's Life* (1982) investigates what might have happened to Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* after she slams the door and leaves her family. This ambitious project was unsuccessful, but demonstrated Comden and Green's versatility. Their last original musical, however, was a triumph, both artistically and financially. *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991), another collaboration with Cy Coleman, ran 981 performances and brought Comden, Green and Coleman another Best Score Tony Award.

Throughout her career as a writer, Comden continued to work a performer with an appearance in films like *Garbo Talks* (1984) and *Slaves of New York* (1989). She and Green also appeared together in countless tributes and concerts including *Follies in Concert*, performed at Avery Fisher Hall in 1985.

Betty Comden was married to artist Steven Kyle from 1942, until his death in 1979. They had two children, Alan Kyle and Suzanne Kyle. Comden died in New York on November 23, 2006.

Scope and content note

This collection is the personal and professional papers of Betty Comden. It consists mainly of scripts and scores. This collection is divided into two series. Series I: Production Files pertains to stage musicals, films and television shows written by Betty Comden. There are scripts for a few projects by other authors which Comden may have considered adapting. The Production Files consist mainly of scripts and scores, though notes, correspondence, outlines, schedules and publicity materials are sometimes included. Series II: Personal Files covers a small amount of non-production items, such as awards and tributes and childhood/family photographs. Also included are a profile of Comden and Green and drafts of various autobiographical writings by Comden. Other items include special material written by Comden for specific occasions or performers.

Arrangement

The Betty Comden papers are organized into the following series:

Series I: Production Files, 1945-2004

Series II: Personal Files, 1929-2003

Key terms

Subjects

Musical films

Musical theater

Musical theater -- New York (State) -- 20th century

-- History and criticism

Theater

Theater -- 20th century

Occupations

Actresses

Lyricists

Playwrights

Names

Bernstein, Leonard

Coleman, Cy

Comden, Betty

Freed, Arthur, 1894-1973

Green, Adolph

Grossman, Larry

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Styne, Jule, 1905-1994

Special formats

Correspondence

Photographs

Scores

Scrapbooks

Screenplays

Scripts

Sheet music

Container list

Series I: Production Files, 1945-2004

- Applause*, 1970
- b.1 f.1 Promptbook, 1970 May
 - b.1 f.2 Sheet Music, 1970
- The Bandwagon*, 1952-1953, 1999
- b.1 f.3 Screenplay, 1952 August 25
 - b.1 f.4 Screenplay, 1953 June 25
 - b.1 f.5-7 Scripts, 1999
 - b.1 f.8 *The Barkleys of Broadway*-Script, 1948
 - b.1 f.9 *Beggar on Horseback*-Script, undated
- Bells Are Ringing*, 1957-2001, undated
- b.2 f.1 Conductor Score and Sheet Music, 1957
 - b.2 f.2 First Draft, undated
 - b.2 f.3-5 Prompt Books, 1977
 - b.2 f.6 Screenplay, 1959
 - b.2 f.7 Revival Scripts-Cuts and Changes, 2001 February 6
- Billion Dollar Baby*, 1945, 1998-1999
- b.3 f.1 Annotated Script, 1945
 - b.3 f.2 Promptbook, 1945
 - b.3 f.3 Revised Draft, 1998
 - b.3 f.4 Recording Script, 1999
 - b.3 f.5 *Bonanza Bound*-Sheet Music and Handbill, undated
 - b.3 f.6 *Dangerous Corner*, undated (Play by J. B. Priestly)
- Do Re Mi*, 1960, 1977, 1999
- b.3 f.7 Sheet Music, 1960
 - b.3 f.8 Promptbook, 1977
 - b.3 f.9 Revised Script, First Draft, 1999 April 5
 - b.3 f.10 Revised Script, 1999 May 11
- A Doll's Life*, 1981-1995
- b.4 f.1-2 Notes, 1981, 1982
 - b.4 f.3 Sheet Music, 1982
 - b.4 f.4 Revised Script, 1994 February 1
 - b.4 f.5 Revised Script, 1994 August 2
 - b.4 f.6 Revised Script, 1995 January 23
 - b.18 f.1 Score, 1982
- Fade Out/Fade In*, 1964-1977 (Alternate title, *A Girl to Remember*)
- b.4 f.7 Sheet Music, 1964
 - b.4 f.8 Promptbook, 1977
 - b.5 f.1-2 Scripts, undated
 - b.18 f.2 Score, 1964, 1965
 - Score, 1964, 1965
 - b.5 f.3 *Die Fledermaus*, 1998 August 14

Series I: Production Files (cont.)

- b.5 f.4 *Good News*-Script and Sheet Music, 1947
Hallelujah, Baby, 1967, 1977, 2002
- b.5 f.5 Sheet Music, 1967, undated
- b.5 f.6 Scripts, 1967 August 16, undated
- b.6 f.1 Scripts, undated
- b.6 f.2 Promptbook, 1977
- b.6 f.3 Revised Script, 2002 July 23
- b.6 f.4 *A Headache...My Job Depends on This*, undated
- b.6 f.5 *I'm Getting Married*, 1966-1967
It's Always Fair Weather, 1954, 1960
- b.6 f.6 Sheet Music, 1960
- b.6 f.7 Screenplay, 1954 August 23
- b.6 f.8 *An Italian Straw Hat*, 1955
A Comedy with Songs in Five Acts by Eugene Labiche and Marc-Michel, English Version by Lynn and Theodore Hoffman
- b.7 f.1 *Lorelei*-Sheet Music, 1973
- b.7 f.2 *Madame Celia*-Notes and Correspondence, 1986
- b.7 f.3 *The Melted Pot or Ned Paltry's Second Play*, 1984 December
On the Town, 1945-2004
- b.7 f.4 Original Script, circa 1945
- b.7 f.5 Album Cover, 1945
- b.7 f.6 Film Adaptation-Screenplay, 1949 February 24
- b.7 f.7 Promptbook, undated
- b.8 f.5 Sheet Music-Variou, 1991
- b.7 f.8 Vocal Score, 1992
- b.8 f.1 London Concert Version-Script, 1992 June 10
- b.8 f.2 Concert Version-Piano/Vocal Score, 1996 March
- b.8 f.3 Playbill and Biographies, 1998
- b.8 f.4 Revised Script, 1998
- b.8 f.6 Revised Script, 1998 December 4
- b.8 f.7 Revised Script, undated
- b.8 f.8 Inside Broadway Version, 2004
- b.8 f.9 Sheet Music, undated
- b.19 f.1-4 Scores, 1944, 1977, undated
On the Twentieth Century, 1978
- b.9 f.1 Script (as *Twentieth Century*), undated
- b.9 f.2 Script, undated
- b.9 f.3 Sheet Music, 1978
- b.20 f.1 Score, 1980

Series I: Production Files (cont.)

- b.9 f.4 *Out of This World*, undated (Script by Comden and Green)
A Party with Betty Comden and Adolph Green, 1949-1994
- b.9 f.5 Clippings, 1977
- b.9 f.6-9 Correspondence, programs, notes, outlines, script excerpts, publicity materials, 1976-1977
- b.11 f.3-11 Correspondence, contracts, programs, schedules, designs, 1984-1994
- b.12 f.2-7 Correspondence, contracts, programs, schedules, designs, 1984-1994
- b.10 f.1-8 Scores, 1986
- b.11 f.1-2 Script, Promptbook and Notes, 1949, 1986
Peter Pan, 1954, 1956
- b.12 f.8 Script, 1954
- b.12 f.9 Sheet music, 1956
- b.13 f.5 *Sacco and Vanzetti*-Script and Score, 2000
By Marc Blitzstein, completed by Leonard Lehrman
- b.12 f.10 *Say It With Music*-Script, 1966 February 14
Singin' in the Rain, 1951-2001
- b.12 f.11 Screenplay, 1951 April 11
- b.12 f.12 Screenplay, 1952 March 17
- b.13 f.1 Stage Version-Script, 1985 March 1
- b.13 f.2 Stage Version-MTI Script, 1986
- b.13 f.3 Stage Version-Program-Melbourne, Australia, 2001
- b.13 f.4 *The Song Goes On: 50 Years of Comden and Green*, 1993 November
- b.13 f.6 *Strictly Dishonorable*, undated
Subways Are for Sleeping, 1960-1962
- b.13 f.7 Script, 1960 March 1
- b.13 f.8 Scripts, 1962 June 1
- b.13 f.9 Sheet Music, 1961 August 29
- b.13 f.10 *Tarzan*-Notes and Correspondence, 1989
- b.14 f.1 *Three-Cornered Moon*, undated (by Gertrude Tonkongy)
- b.20 f.2 *Two on the Aisle*-Bound Score, undated
- b.14 f.2 *Your Voice*, 1977 (by Robert Lawrence Weer)
- b.14 f.3-5 *Villa Vitalo*, 1992, undated
- b.14 f.3 Script, 1992
- b.14 f.4-5 Scripts, undated
- b.14 f.6 *What's Cooking?*, 1986 February
The Will Rogers Follies, 1991-1995
- b.14 f.7 Publicity Materials, 1991-1992
- b.23 f.4 Scrapbook, 1991-1992
- b.14 f.8 Script-Casino Version, 1995 March 22

Series I: Production Files (cont.)

Wonderful Town, 1952-1994

- b.15 f.1 Piano/Vocal Score, 1994
- b.15 f.2 Script, 1994
- b.21 f.1-3 Scores, 1952, 1977
- b.22 f.1-3 Scores, undated
- b.15 f.3 *Wonderland*-Script, 1956 February 3
- b.15 f.4-12 Various Projects and Ideas, 1953-1994
- b.16 f.1-8 Various Projects and Ideas, 1990-2004, undated
- b.22 f.4 Various Projects-Scores, undated

Series II: Personal Files, 1929-2003

- b.16 f.9-11 Autobiographical Writings, 2003, undated
- b.16 f.12 Awards, 1992-1999
- b.23 f.1 Award, 1999
- b.23 f.2 Family and Childhood Items, 1929
Photographs, Letter, Childhood Photograph Collection of Actors and Actresses
- b.17 f.1 Poem and other Miscellaneous Writings, undated
- b.17 f.2 Profile by Miles Krueger, 2001
- b.17 f.3-15 Special Material, 1959-1987
- b.23 f.3 Tribute, *The Midas Touch*-Photographs and Correspondence, 1990