

The New York Public Library
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Margaret Mayo papers

1882-1970 (bulk 1901-1950)

*T-Mss 1970-002

Compiled by Laura Slezak Karas and Susan Malsbury, June 2013

Summary

Creator: Mayo, Margaret, 1882-1951

Title: Margaret Mayo papers, 1882-1970 (bulk 1901-1950)

Size: 20.83 linear feet (50 boxes)

Source: Donated by the Authors League Fund, 1970.

Abstract: Margaret Mayo (1882-1951) was an American actress and dramatist. Her papers document Mayo's professional life as an actress, playwright, and screenwriter; her position as head of the Scenario Department of Goldwyn Pictures Corporation; her work overseas entertaining the troops during World War I; her real estate holdings in the Hudson Valley; her marriage to actor, director, playwright, and dramatist Edgar Selwyn; and her interests in spiritualism and animal welfare.

Access: Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying and photography will apply.

Copyright information: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

Preferred citation: Margaret Mayo papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Custodial history: Files were maintained by the Authors League Fund prior to donation.

Processing note: Sections of the papers may have been previously arranged and labeled by the Authors League Fund. Descriptive notes attached to folders have been retained, though the majority of the collection has been refoldered. The original call number for select Baby Mine scripts has been retained in the container list. The collection is quite dirty and researchers should take care when examining the materials.

Creator history

Margaret Mayo (November 19, 1882–February 25, 1951) was an American actress and dramatist. She was born as Lillian Slatten in Brownsville, Illinois, to Warren Slatten and Elizabeth Slatten (née Cavender). After her parents divorced, Mayo moved with her mother to Portland, Oregon, where she attended school at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Salem, Oregon. Mayo moved to New York City in her early teens and won a small part in the play *Thoroughbred* at the Garrick Theatre in 1896. She took the stage name of Margaret Mayo and continued to act until 1903. Mayo met her husband Edgar Selwyn in 1897 when they were both acting in William Gillette's play *Secret Service* and the pair married in 1901. Mayo began her writing career that same year, when she wrote a dramatization of Ouida's novel *Under Two Flags*. In 1903, Mayo was commissioned for two projects— to write the American adaptation of the French farce *Divorçons* and to dramatize Mary Augusta Ward's bestselling novel *The Marriage of William Ashe*. She also won a widely-publicized contest when she wrote a four-act play in twenty-four hours (*The Mart*).

In 1907, Mayo wrote a dramatization of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and an original play, *Polly of the Circus*. *The Jungle* was considered a failure, but *Polly of the Circus* became a popular play for stock companies to produce and was adapted for film twice—as a silent film starring Mae Marsh in 1917 and as a talking picture starring Marion Davies and Clark Gable in 1932. In 1910, Mayo wrote *Baby Mine*, a play about a young wife passing off an orphan baby as her own to win back her estranged husband. Mayo famously wrote it in three days after she was inspired by the newspaper headline "Three thousand husbands in Chicago fondling babies not their own." This play became her most successful work. It was produced at Daly's Theatre and ran for 287 performances. It was also translated into French, Japanese, Spanish, and Russian and performed globally. A musical version, *Rock-A-Bye-Baby*, was performed in 1918, and a film version was produced in 1928. Mayo's other plays include *Commencement Days*, *Crippled Hearts*, and *Twin Beds*.

Mayo wrote plays with Aubrey Kennedy and their most popular collaboration, *Seeing Things* (1920), was inspired by Mayo's interest in automatic writing. Kennedy was a talented playwright and inventor whose professional life was prematurely cut short due to alcoholism and mental illness. In 1940, Kennedy worked on the *Ave Maria Hour* radio show and lived at the Graymoor monastery of the Franciscan Friars in Garrison, New York, and throughout the 1940s Kennedy worked in temporary positions at various resorts, hotels, and ranches in New York and Florida.

In 1917, Edgar Selwyn and his brother Archibald founded Goldwyn Pictures Corporation with Samuel Goldfish (who would later change his name to Goldwyn) and Mayo became head of the scenario department. She left this position in 1918 to head the Overseas Theatre League. She wrote and performed in her own acting troop, known as Mayo's Shock Unit, and entertained troops in France. She later wrote an account of her experience abroad called *Trouping for the Troops*. At the close of the war, the league dissolved but was later recreated as the Overseas Theatre League of the Y.M.C.A.

Upon her return to the United States in 1919, Selwyn and Mayo divorced. Prior to this, they had been seen as one of the most happy and successful married couples in the entertainment industry. They had collaborated on the script for the 1912 musical *Wall Street Girl* and Selwyn's production company, Selwyn & Co., produced and managed most of Mayo's work. After the divorce, Mayo hired the law firm of Watterson and Gore to examine the Selwyn & Co. accounts for money owed to her. This case was further complicated as Selwyn & Co. sold stock rights of some of Mayo's plays to the American Play Company when they merged in 1914. Both the American Play Company and Century Company were stock-leasing companies that represented Mayo's work, while Hugh Massie & Company represented the foreign rights of the same works.

After her divorce, which coincided with her semi-retirement from the entertainment industry, Mayo lived full-time at Sunny Acres, a river-front estate in Harmon-on-the-Hudson, New York which she and her mother had bought in 1910. By this time, her mother was living with her and had legally changed her name to Elizabeth Mayo. While she still occasionally wrote and submitted plays, Mayo began her second career in Hudson Valley real estate. Under the auspices of the Gomay Realty Corporation, of which she was the president and sole owner, Mayo began buying and selling land, and renting out properties. Mayo lost a large portion of her wealth in the stock market crash of 1929 and her once successful real estate venture subsequently suffered. She also entered into two notable legal cases. She lost a ten year litigation against the City of New York regarding the diversion of water from her property for the Catskill aqueduct, but won a case against New York Central Railroad when Mayo proved that some land belonged to her estate through royal grant.

In addition to writing and real estate, Mayo was interested in spiritualism, inventing new household products, and animal welfare. For over twenty years, she used automatic, or spirit, writing to communicate with the spirit world. Mayo took notes upon waking to synchronize her conscious, subconscious, and psychic minds. She often used automatic writing to generate dialogue and ideas for plays, as well as to seek professional guidance. Mayo credited the conception of at least one play, *Woman's World*, to a message from the spirit world. She also invented products, built prototypes, and sought patents for her inventions, an interest she shared with Aubrey Kennedy who invented airplane parts. Mayo had many cats and dogs and was interested in animal welfare topics at the time, particularly in shelters and humane methods of euthanasia. She wrote an unpublished book from a dog's perspective called *A Dog's Life*.

Mayo's assets were frozen off-and-on in the late-1930s and early-1940s and she experienced ever increasing financial hardship. Mayo contacted the Authors League Fund for financial assistance and left her estate to the Fund upon her death. She died in Ossining, New York.

Source: Felicia Hardison Londré. "Mayo, Margaret"; <http://www.anb.org/articles/18/18-02545.html>; American National Biography Online Feb. 2000. Access Date: Mon Jun 3 2013.

Scope and content note

The Margaret Mayo papers are arranged into four series: Correspondence, Personal Papers, Professional Papers, and Real Estate Materials. The papers document her professional life as an actress, playwright, and screenwriter; her position as head of the Scenario Department of Goldwyn Pictures Corporation; her work overseas entertaining the troops during World War I; her real estate holdings in the Hudson Valley; her marriage to actor, director, playwright, and dramatist Edgar Selwyn; and her interests in spiritualism and animal welfare.

The majority of the collection documents Mayo's professional work as a dramatist through scripts, notes, drafts, scenarios, professional correspondence, posters and programs, publicity materials, box office and royalty statements, contracts and copyright filings, and legal action taken (or threatened) when Mayo believed her copyright was violated. These materials provide rich documentation on the entertainment industry in the early twentieth century and Mayo's unique role as a woman in the largely male-dominated field. Other writings, not related to the entertainment industry, include articles, short stories, letters to the editors, and text and illustrations for her book, *A Dog's Life*.

Mayo's personal life is documented through autobiographical materials; correspondence to and from friends and acquaintances; financial and legal records, including a deposition for her divorce in 1919; and automatic, or spirit, writing. After retiring from the entertainment industry in 1919, Mayo became interested in real estate in the Hudson Valley; her properties, the various legal actions surrounding them, and their eventual financial drain are well documented in the collection through maps, blueprints, photographs, boarder ledgers, research files, legal documents, and correspondence.

Arrangement

The Margaret Mayo papers are organized into the following series:

- Series I: Correspondence, 1893-1946
- Series II: Personal Papers, 1896-1950
- Series III: Professional Papers, 1893-1970
- Series IV: Real Estate Materials, 1882-1948

Key terms

Subjects

Divorce
Dramatists
Literature and spiritualism
Motion picture industry
Real estate investment -- New York (State)
Real property
Spirit writings
Theater -- Anecdotes
World War, 1914-1918 -- Personal narratives

Places

Hudson River Valley (N.Y. and N.J.)

Events

Great Depression

Names

American Play Company
Goldwyn Pictures Corporation
Kennedy, Aubrey
Mayo, Margaret, 1882-1951
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Selwyn & Co.
Selwyn, Edgar, 1875-1944

Container list

Series I: Correspondence, 1893-1946 (5 boxes)

The correspondence is arranged alphabetically by correspondent. The correspondence is both personal and professional and documents Mayo's work as an actress and dramatist, her real estate holdings, her various legal cases, and financial issues. A recurring theme in the correspondence is the constant work Mayo undertook to protect the copyright of her plays, film scripts, and scenarios, and to ensure that she received proper payment from producers and publishing companies.

There is a significant amount of correspondence with Upton Sinclair and his second wife, Mary Craig Kimbrough, and with the playwright Aubrey Kennedy. Mayo's correspondence with the Sinclairs documents their friendship, and includes Mayo's comments on Sinclairs' Sylvia novels. Mayo's correspondence with Kennedy spans three decades and regards their collaborative writing projects and Kennedy's late life-in-life decline due to alcoholism. Other notable correspondents include Blanche Bates, Alexandra Carlisle, Irwin Cobb, Constance Collier, Jane Cowl, Bob Davis, Max Dearly, Cecil B. DeMille, Charles Dillingham, Father Divine (M. J. Divine), Max Eastman, Maxine Elliott, Eva Moore Esmond, William Faversham, Minnie Maddern Fiske, James Forbes, Daniel Frohman, Avery Hopwood, Salisbury Field, Donald Calthrop, Edith Ellis, Julie Herne, Clara Lippman Man, and Sewell Collins.

Correspondence with the law firm O'Brien, Malevinsky, and Driscoll represent a suit against Mayo by Aubrey Kennedy's wife Agnes Kennedy for alienation of affection and contracts for Baby Mine, Bridal Night, Seeing Things, Twin Beds, and the Ziegfeld production of Polly of the Circus.

- b.1 f.1-24 A-D, 1901-1946
- b.2 f.1-28 E-J, 1900-1945
Martha Hennebique file includes photographs.
- b.3 f.1-13 K-L, 1899-1946
- b.4 f.1-17 M-S, 1893-1946
- b.5 f.1-5 T-Y, 1907-1946
- b.5 f.6 Unidentified, 1901-1937

Series II: Personal Papers, 1896-1950 (3 boxes)

The personal papers are arranged in alphabetical order by file title. These files document Mayo's turbulent marriage (1899-1919) to actor, director, producer, and dramatist Edgar Selwyn, its continuing effects, largely financial, upon her life, and her interest in automatic writing. Mayo's autobiographical materials consist of a 124 page epistle to Edgar Selwyn detailing the entirety of their relationship, from their courtship to divorce, notes on Mayo's youth, and comments on women as playwrights. Financial records consist of two bank account books and royalty statements. Legal files regard divorce proceedings, alimony payments, and Mayo's controlling interest in Selwyn & Co. For legal and financial material regarding specific plays and productions, see Series III: Professional Files.

Mayo's automatic writing spans two decades, from 1924 to 1943, and consists of messages she believed were directed by spirits. Although many of the messages simply contain yes or no answers to undocumented questions, some contain the written questions as well, or Mayo's explanations. The conception of the play *Woman's World* is represented in the writing as well as unidentified dialog and scenarios. The file on business ideas include a dress making venture and materials related to the *Character Autograph Book*, an autograph book where one could preserve the characteristics and the autographs of friends and acquaintances. Inventions consist of a sound-proof, dust proof ventilator, sound reproduction mechanism for radio, a nicotine catcher, a bed chair, and a telephone earpiece, and a patent by Aubrey Kennedy for an airplane stabilizer. Miscellaneous papers include a report on blackmailers (1920) and medical physical by the Life Extension Institute. The photographs are all professional studio portraits of other entertainers and most are signed to Mayo.

- b.5 f.7 Animal Welfare, 1932-1942 (notebook)
- b.5 f.8-11 Autobiographical Material, 1900-1928, undated
- b.5 f.12 Automatic Writing, 1924-1925
- b.6 f.1-9 Automatic Writing, 1925-1943, undated
- b.7 f.1-2 Automatic Writing, 1926-1927, undated
- b.7 f.3 Business Ideas, 1916-1918, undated
- b.7 f.4-6 Financial Records, 1932-1923
- b.7 f.7-9 Inventions, 1922-1934, undated
- b.7 f.10 Inventions, undated (Telephone earpiece prototype)
- b.7 f.11 Inventories of Books and Prints, undated
- b.8 f.1-2 Legal Files, 1914-1950
- b.8 f.3 Miscellaneous, 1915-1932
- b.50 Photographs, 1896-1917
- b.8 f.4 Printed Material, 1915-1929, undated
- b.8 f.5 Publicity, 1915-1932
- b.8 f.6 Theater (Hudson Valley), 1937-1939

Series III: Professional Papers, 1893-1970 (35 boxes)

Professional files are grouped by general professional files regarding companies and studios; theater and film materials; World War I material; and other writings. General professional files are arranged in alphabetical order. The American Play Company and Century Company files contain contracts and royalty statements regarding Mayo's works, and the Selwyn & Co. files represent Mayo's inquest into the company's accounts in order to collect monies owed to her. Selwyn & Co. sold stock rights of some of Mayo's plays to the American Play Company when they merged in 1914 and these sales are also partially documented. The files on Hugh Massie & Company represent the negotiation of the foreign rights of Mayo's works. The company files represent most of Mayo's major and minor works including *Baby Mine*, *Commencement Days*, *Divorcons*, *Naughty Wife*, *Polly of the Circus*, *Snake Bite*, and *Twin Beds*.

The Authors League Fund file concerns her request for financial assistance prior to her death and the posthumous management of her estate including renewal of copyright and royalty statements. The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer files consist of early management documents and policies, initial stock distributions, and Mayo's working files from her position as Head of the Scenario Department. The studio is represented in its three iterations: Goldwyn Pictures Corporation; Metro-Goldwyn; and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Submissions contain letters, often with scenarios, sent to Mayo from writers and production studios requesting that Mayo read their scripts.

Film and theater files are arranged alphabetically by title followed by general files arranged by format. These files can include scripts, box office statements, plot books, blocking instructions, and set designs; submission, rejection, and acceptance letters; and legal files. Additionally, some files contain posthumous contracts and royalties. Mayo usually used multiple titles for her plays and she would often revisit and resubmit a play under a new title, sometimes working on the same play over a decade or two. Folders in this series retain Mayo's designation and below is a list of titles and their various iterations:

Baby Mine: *Rock-A-Bye-Baby* (musical version)
The Cheat: *The Flirt*, *Infatuation*, and *Zella*
Dear Debtors: *The Dorrits*, *Mister Dorrit*, *A Little Matter of Business*, *Room 60*, and *Take Your Husband's Word for It*
His Bridal Night: *The Stolen Honey Moon*
Lovelight: *All Lit Up*
Marie Antoinette: *Every Inch a Queen* and *Queen Gambles*
Sorry: *Behind the Scenes*, *Bright Lights*, *Dolly Love*, *Estranged*, and *The White Way*
Polly of the Circus: *Peg of the Circus* and *Spangles* (musical version)
Poor Boob: *Poor Simp*
Seeing Things: *Mousey* and *Loving Ladies*
Tom Cat: *The Darlings*, *Pettie Darling*, *Say It with Flowers*, and *Scared Cats*
The Transgressors: *The Acting Governor*

Productions most represented include *Baby Mine*, *Crippled Hearts*, *Polly of the Circus*, and *The Tom Cat*. Files for *Baby Mine*, *Divorcons*, *Polly of the Circus*, and *Twin Beds* contain material regarding the film versions of the plays. *Baby Mine* also contains extensive files of royalty statements and contracts including domestic and European productions. Mayo

dramatized many novels and short stories—files for Belshazzar and The Marriage of William Ashe contain correspondence with their respective authors, William Stearns Davis and Mary Augusta Ward. The Aubrey Kennedy files contain the scripts God Laughed, The Billion Dollar Mystery, The Power of the Cross, That's That, and Wings of Victory.

General theater and film files include an incomplete alphabetical folio that contains the names of plays and scenarios, the dates they were submitted to and returned, and additional comments. The file titled 'Play Letters to be filed,' Mayo's designation, consists of unsorted correspondence regarding particular productions.

World War I files represent Mayo's booth at the Allied Bazaar Theater and her participation overseas in the Over There Theatre League. The files contain posters for performances, news clippings, and scripts, as well as correspondence regarding a reunion of performers Mayo attempted to organize in 1945. The files also hold typescript drafts of Trouping for the Troops, Mayo's account of her work during World War I. The miscellaneous files includes printed matter such as The World's Battle Fronts at a Glance (maps, 1918) and Caption A. R. Gercken's Military Tips and Pointers (1918).

Writings consist of newspaper submissions; short stories, some under pseudonyms; and drafts for her book A Dog's Life with illustrations by Bert Cobb. Mayo wrote letters to newspaper editors often, and newspapers submissions contain numerous articles and letters on the role of the arts and artists in society, remedies for the Great Depression, Hudson Valley land ordinances and local politics, and the Lindbergh Trial.

- b.9 f.1-3 American Play Company, 1915-1949
- b.9 f.4-5 The Authors League of America--American Dramatists, 1920-1936
- b.9 f.6-7 The Authors League Fund, 1944-1956
- b.9 f.8 Century Play Company, 1928-1943
- b.9 f.9 Department of Public Welfare--Works Division, 1934
- b.10 f.1-2 Hughes Massie & Company, 1925-1938
- b.10 f.3-8 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1916-1938
- b.11 f.1 Production Lists and Copyright Ledger, 1921-1928, undated
- b.11 f.2 Samuel French, Inc.
- b.11 f.3-6 Selwyn and Company, 1914-1932
- b.11 f.7 Schubert Enterprises, 1906-1927
- b.12 f.1 Stock Company Bulletins, 1924-1927
- b.12 f.2-3 Submissions, 1910-1921
- b.12 f.4-5 Symphony Theatre, 1918-1927
- Theater and Film Materials
- b.16 f.5 *The Austrian Dancer*, 1927
- b.13 f.1-6 *Baby Mine*, 1910-1970 (8 - MWEZ + N. C. 21,536)
- b.16 f.1-4 *Baby Mine*, 1910-1940
- b.14 f.1-6 *Baby Mine*, 1912-1969

Series III: Professional Papers, 1893-1970 (cont.)

Theater and Film Materials (cont.)

- b.12 f.6-7 *Baby Mine*, 1914-1926
 - b.15 f.1-5 *Baby Mine*, 1917-1949, undated
 - b.17 f.1-6 *Behind the Scenes-The Bogies*, 1910-1939, undated
 - b.18 f.1-6 *Bright Lights*, 1914-1950
 - b.19 f.1-6 *The Brute-Commencement Days*, 1901-1925
 - b.20 f.1-6 *Commencement Days-Crippled Hearts*, 1907-1950
 - b.21 f.1-6 *Crucifixion-Divorcons*, 1907-1941, undated
 - b.22 f.1 *Divorcons-Estranged*, 1923-1944, undated
 - b.23 f.1-5 *Estranged-Fed Up*, 1915-1948
 - b.24 f.1-10 *Fed Up-His Bridal Night*, 1907-1941, undated
 - b.25 f.1-9 *His Lordship Labors-Kennedy, Aubrey*, 1902-1936, undated
 - b.26 f.1-8 *Kennedy, Aubrey-The Marriage of William Ashe*, 1893-1942, undated
 - b.27 f.1-8 *The Marriage of William Ashe-Polly of the Circus*, 1900-1935
 - b.28 f.1-5 *Polly of the Circus*, 1907-1945, undated
 - b.29 f.1-7 *Polly of the Circus*, 1907-1944
 - b.50 *Polly of the Circus*, 1909-1927 (Photographs)
 - b.30 f.1-8 *Poor Boob-Say it with Flowers*, 1915-1938
 - b.31 f.1-5 *Say it with Flowers-Seeing Things*, 1920-1926
 - b.32 f.1-7 *The Show Stop-Tea for Three*, 1915-1933
 - b.33 f.1-6 *The Tom Cat*, 1928-1945
 - b.34 f.1-5 *The Tom Cat-The Transgressors*, 1908-1927
 - b.35 f.1-5 *Twin Beds*, 1913-1956
 - b.36 f.1-5 *Twin Beds-The World's Enemy*, 1903-1943
 - b.36 f.6-7 Dialogue, 1912-1915
 - b.37 f.1-2 Dialogue, 1916, undated
 - b.43 f.5 Play Letters to be Filed, 1928-1930
 - b.44 f.1 Play Letters to be Filed, 1928-1930
 - b.38 f.1-5 Scenarios, 1923, undated
 - b.39 f.1-5 Scenarios, 1928, undated
 - b.40 f.1 Scenarios, undated
 - b.37 f.3-6 Short Plays, 1905-1931
 - b.37 f.7 Submissions, 1920-1922
- World War I
- b.40 f.2-5 Allied Bazaar, 1916-1917
 - b.50 Armband, undated
 Black felt armband that reads 'Entertainer YMCA.'
 - b.41 f.3 Correspondence, 1916-1922

Series III: Professional Papers, 1893-1970 (cont.)

World War I (cont.)

- b.41 f.9 Maps and Posters, 1917-1918
- b.41 f.5 Miscellaneous, 1917-1920, undated
- b.40 f.6 Over There Theatre League, 1918-1920, undated
- b.41 f.2-3 Over There Theatre League, 1918-1946
- b.41 f.6 Ten Allies Costume Ball, 1916
- b.41 f.7-8 *Trouping for the Troops*, 1918-1921

Writings, Other

- b.42 f.1 *A Dog's Life*, 1931-1936
- b.50 *A Dog's Life*, 1936, undated (Illustrations)
- b.42 f.2-5 Newspaper Submissions, 1931-1935, undated
- b.43 f.1 Newspaper Submissions, 1932, undated
- b.43 f.2-4 Short Stories and Essays, 1920-1940, undated

Series IV: Real Estate Materials, 1882-1948 (6 boxes)

Real estate files are grouped by the Croton Point Company, the Gomay Realty Corporation, and Sunny Acres, Mayo's estate on the Hudson River. All reflect Mayo's interest in the Hudson Valley and preserving its character. Sunny Acres files represent her legal cases against the City of New York and against the New York Central Railroad. Files regarding the latter contain Mayo's research into the history of the property including the field book of surveyor and civil engineer James Kirby from 1882 on various properties. Entries regarding Sunny Acres are under the owner at that time, J. M. Cockroft (James). Other papers consist of deeds, mortgage papers, maps, and blueprints. The Gomay Realty Corporation files contain rental correspondence and receipts, records of sale, blueprint and maps regarding various rental properties as well as undeveloped lots of land—in 1932 the Corporation listed 14 buildings for sale and 86 lots. Also included is an unsuccessful attempt to interest the Y. M.C.A. to purchase property for their headquarters.

- b.44 f.2 Croton Point Company, 1917-1921
- b.44 f.3-5 Gomay Realty Corporation, 1932-1946
- b.45 f.1-5 Gomay Realty Corporation, 1932-1946
- b.46 f.1-4 Gomay Realty Corporation, 1932-1946
- b.46 f.5 Sunny Acres, 1882-1948
- b.47 f.1-5 Sunny Acres, 1882-1948
- b.48 f.1-5 Sunny Acres, 1882-1948
- b.49 f.1-5 Sunny Acres, 1882-1948
- b.50 Sunny Acres, 1904-1936 (Blueprints and maps)