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Guide to the
Wolfgang Roth designs and papers
1928-1987
*T-Mss 1989-013

Compiled by Kit Fluker, August 2013

Summary

Creator: Roth, Wolfgang, 1910-1988

Title: Wolfgang Roth designs and papers, 1928-1987

Size: 9.29 linear feet (30 boxes)

Source: Donated by the Estate of Wolfgang Roth, 1989.

Abstract: Wolfgang Roth (1910-1988) was a set designer, costume designer, and artist. Roth began his career in Germany in the 1920s, and immigrated to the United States in 1938. He designed for Broadway and off-Broadway plays and musicals, operas, and national and international touring productions. The Wolfgang Roth designs and papers date from 1928 to 1987, and consist of Roth's scenic and costume designs, technical drawings, photographs, sketches, production notes, scripts, programs, clippings, and a small amount of correspondence. Also present is material related to Roth's art exhibits and musical projects.

Access: Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying and photography will apply. Advance notice may be required. Inquiries regarding audio materials in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (theatrediv@nypl.org). Audio materials will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

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Processing note: Materials were refoldered, and original folder labels were retained where they existed. Paintings, drawings, and collages were foldered or interleaved with paper. Original groupings of files and photographs were retained in most instances.

Creator history

Wolfgang Roth (1910-1988) was a set designer, costume designer, and artist. He was born in Berlin, and apprenticed with Traugott Müller, set designer for Erwin Piscator. In 1929 and the early 1930s, Roth collaborated on productions with Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. He was active in Germany's political cabaret (Kabarett) as a writer, performer, and designer.

In 1933, Roth left Germany for Vienna and then Zurich, where his work included designing for Vaudeville and variety shows at the Corso Theater. He moved to the United States in 1938, and became an American citizen in 1945.

Roth remained active in the theater from his arrival in the United States through the 1980s, working in the United States as well as in Canada and Europe. He designed for Broadway and off-Broadway productions, summer stock theater, and opera.

Roth's theatrical work in the 1940s included several collaborations with director Margaret Webster. Roth designed sets and costumes for her 1946 *Androcles and the Lion* and for her touring Shakespeare company. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Roth was chief designer for a series of plays produced by the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) that included *The Wanhope Building* and *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Roth's scenery for a 1952 Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*, and its subsequent European tour, was critically acclaimed. From 1959 to 1961, he designed for the Cincinnati Summer Opera, working on such operas as *Aida*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *Don Giovanni*. He designed productions at the Metropolitan Opera, including *Don Pasquale* (1955) and *Tristan und Isolde* (1969). Roth worked on several plays created by George Tabori: *Brecht on Brecht* (1961), *The Cannibals* (1968) and *Pinkville* (1971) at the American Place Theatre, and Tabori's adaption of Brecht's *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* (1964). Brecht's approach to stage design was an important influence on Roth, and Roth maintained an interest in Brecht's work and writing for his entire career.

Roth had an interest in the circus, Vaudeville, and variety shows that was reflected in his art and theatrical work. A high point of Roth's career was his creation of *The Littlest Circus*, a dance pantomime for children that began touring in 1957 and continued to tour through the early 1960s. The show was also broadcast on CBS in 1963.

As an artist, Roth worked most frequently in paint and collage; he also created sculptures. His work was exhibited in art museums and galleries in the United States and Europe.

In the 1960s, Roth recorded two albums of German folk songs for Folkway Records. Roth played lute and sang on the recordings. In the 1970s, he created a show based on the Berlin Kabarett of his youth, in which he performed songs by Hanns Eisler, Bertolt Brecht, Julian Arendt, and others.

He was married to Lee Roth.

Scope and content note

The Wolfgang Roth designs and papers hold Roth's set and costume designs (consisting of drawings, paintings, and collages); technical drawings; production papers (consisting mostly of scripts); photographs of Roth, his productions, and his colleagues; programs; clippings; scores; lyrics; and career information. Materials date from 1928 to 1987 and deal with Roth's theatrical work, and, to a lesser extent, his artwork and musical projects. Materials are chiefly in English but also in German.

Overviews of Roth's career as a theatrical designer and an artist, as well as a small amount of correspondence from his professional colleagues, can be found in the career information files. Roth's career is also documented in clippings, articles, and other memorabilia mounted on cardboard, resembling scrapbooks. The collection holds programs for productions that Roth worked on from the 1940s to the 1980s.

Present with Roth's clippings, programs, and memorabilia is a small amount of materials related to Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, which Brecht founded. These materials consist of photographs

released in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Berliner Ensemble, programs, and articles about Brecht.

Designs and technical drawings date from 1939 to 1984. Productions from the 1940s are the best represented. Roth created his designs in gouache, pastel, pencil, ink, and collage. Original designs include costumes for *Androcles and the Lion* and *The Secret Concubine*; all other designs and technical drawings are for sets. In some instances, photographs and copies of the designs are present, as well as clippings.

The collection holds a large amount of photographs and prints mounted on cardboard, documenting Roth's theatrical work and, to a lesser extent, his art, from 1928 to 1979. The images include copies of Roth's initial designs as well as photographs of shows. A small number of the images are annotated or matted with clippings. Productions of the Cincinnati Opera are particularly well-represented. Present are images of designs and sets for political cabarets (Kabarett) from 1928 to 1930.

Loose photographs and prints consist of photographic prints, negatives, slides, and a small number of postcards. Photographs depict Roth, his friends and colleagues, his theatrical work, and his art. Photographs of people include informal and candid shots as well as headshots and publicity photographs, some signed. Present is a folder of photographs of Vaudeville stars and musicians who Roth knew, or knew of, in Zurich. Negative images of sets Roth created from the 1930s to the 1960s are here. Slides depict the sets of *Doña Rosita* (1980), *Amadeus*, and *Have* (both in 1985). Also present are slides that were projected as part of the scenery for *Hanna Senesh* (1983).

Roth created a series of collages incorporating poems by Brecht (Collagen zu Gedichten von Bertolt Brecht), which were exhibited in Germany in 1983. This collection holds photographs from the exhibit and postcards of the artwork, as well as a few clippings.

The collection holds a small album and loose photographs of actor Erwin Kalser in various theatrical productions from the 1930s to 1950s. The album and many of the photographs have been inscribed to Roth by Kalser. There is a small amount of print material with the photographs.

The Littlest Circus materials consist mostly of large photographic prints, proof sheets, and negatives. Also present are a show prospectus and programs.

Production files chiefly consist of scripts, a small number of which contain notes and initial rough sketches by Roth. Some of the scripts have handwritten changes. There is also a small amount of related material such as production schedules and correspondence. Present are production files for *David and Paula* by Howard Fast, Brecht's *Galileo*, *Amadeus*, *Bernardine*, *The Cannibals*, *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*, *Kaspar*, *Leda Had a Little Swan*, *Lolita*, *Pinkville*, and *Schweyk in the Second World War*, among others.

Materials related to Roth's musical projects consist mostly of scores and lyrics from both traditional and contemporary German and American songs. These include songs by Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht, as well as German folk songs that were eventually used in Roth's two albums, *Early German Ballads* volumes 1 and 2. Some lyrics have translations by Roth. Materials related to Roth's 1970s Kabarett show consist of programs, clippings, photographs of the show, slides used during the show, and scores and lyrics for songs which Roth prepared and performed for the show. Also present is an open reel audio tape used during the performance.

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Arrangement

The collection is arranged alphabetically by material type and subject. Designs and technical drawings are arranged alphabetically by production.

Key terms

Subjects

Music-halls (Variety-theaters, cabarets, etc.)
Theaters -- Stage-setting and scenery

Occupations

Set designers

Names

ANTA (Organization)
Berliner Ensemble
Cincinnati Opera Association
Kaiser, Erwin
Roth, Wolfgang, 1910-1988

Special formats

Clippings (information artifacts)
Photographs
Preliminary drawings (drawings)
Programs (documents)
Scripts (documents)
Technical drawings

Container list

- b.29 f.9-12 Career Information, 1942-1980s
 - Clippings, Programs, and Memorabilia
 - b.15 1930s-1970s
 - b.16 1930s-1980
 - b.17 1940s-1987
 - b.28 f.6-7 Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, 1956-1980s
 - b.24 f.2-6 Programs, 1940s-1971
 - b.25 f.1-11 Programs, 1960-1980s
 - Designs and Technical Drawings
 - b.6 f.8 *Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning*, 1942
 - b.3 *Amadeus*, 1983-1984
 - b.5 f.11-12 *American Freight*, 1940
 - b.1 *Androcles and the Lion*, 1946
 - b.6 f.2-4 *Androcles and the Lion*, 1946
 - b.5 f.7 *As You Desire Me*, 1949
 - b.5 f.6 *Borderline*, 1939
 - b.2 *Brecht on Brecht*, 1961 (Reproductions and clippings.)
 - b.5 f.16 *Broadway Comedy*, 1948 (Photograph.)
 - b.4 *Candide*, 1956
 - b.2 *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*, 1947 (Photographs and clippings.)
 - b.5 f.1-3 *A Comedy*, 1940
 - b.2 *Do You Know the Milky Way?*, 1963 (Clippings.)
 - b.1 *Doña Rosita*, 1980 (Includes technical drawings.)
 - b.6 f.1 *Doña Rosita*, 1980 (Citation for set design.)
 - b.5 f.13 *Dracula*, 1940
 - b.2 *The First Million*, 1943
 - b.4 *Die Fledermaus*, undated (Photographs.)
 - b.3 *The Grinding Machine*, 1978 (Reproductions and technical drawings.)
 - b.3 *Ice Age*, 1975 (Includes technical drawings.)
 - b.2 *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1963
 - b.3 *Liliom*, 1940
 - b.5 f.14 *Macbeth*, 1948
 - b.2 *The Merchant of Venice*, 1966 (Technical drawings.)
 - b.2 *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, 1959 (Technical blueprints.)
 - b.3 *Porgy and Bess*, 1950s (Reproductions and photographs.)
 - b.5 f.4-5 *A Pound on Demand*, 1946
 - b.2 *The Road to Rome*, 1948 (Technical drawing.)
 - b.2 *Rum an Coca Cola*, 1977 (Reproductions and technical drawings.)
 - b.2 *The Seagull*, 1968 (Technical drawings.)

Designs and Technical Drawings (cont.)

- b.1 *The Secret Concubine*, 1960
- b.1 *Strider*, 1979 (Includes technical drawings.)
- b.2 *Strider*, 1979 (Includes technical drawings.)
- b.4 Summer Theater Musical Revues and Variety Shows, 1940-1941
- b.6 f.6-7 Summer Theater Musical Revues and Variety Shows, 1940
- b.5 f.8-10 *Temporary Island*, 1948
 - b.1 *These Are the Times*, 1939
 - b.2 *These Are the Times*, 1939
 - b.4 *Too Hot For Maneuvers*, 1945 (Includes technical drawings.)
 - b.4 *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, 1950 (Includes technical drawings.)
- b.5 f.15 *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, 1950
 - b.2 *The Trial*, 1969 (Reproductions and technical drawings.)
- b.6 f.5 Unidentified Interior with Piano, undated
 - b.1 *The Wanhope Building*, 1948
- b.6 f.9 *The Wanhope Building*, 1948 (Technical blueprints.)
 - b.2 *Yellow Jack*, 1947

Musical Projects

- b.29 f.1-2 Kabarett, 1960-1970s
- b.28 f.1-2 Kabarett, 1970s
- b.29 f.3-8 Songs, 1929-1977, undated
- b.30 f.5 Songs, undated

Photographs and Prints

Mounted on Cardboard

- b.13 1928-1930s
- b.10 1930s-1979
- b.12 1934-1938
- b.14 1934-1979
- b.9 1935-1969
- b.11 1940-1960
- b.7 1940s-1960s
- b.8 1940s-1970

Loose and in Albums

- b.27 f.1-13 1930s-1985
- b.28 f.3-5 Collages with Poems by Bertolt Brecht, 1980s
- b.27 f.14-15 Erwin Kalser, 1935-1986
- b.26 f.1-12 *The Littlest Circus*, 1950s-1960s

Photographs and Prints (cont.)

Loose and in Albums (cont.)

b.30 f.1 *The Littlest Circus*, 1960s

b.30 f.2 Wolfgang Roth, undated

Production Papers

b.23 f.1-11 1936-1982, undated

b.19 f.1-9 1950s-1970

b.18 f.1-8 1950s-1982

b.21 f.1-7 1952-1979

b.22 f.1-8 1960s-1981

b.20 f.1-10 1970s-1980s

b.30 f.4-5 1979-1980

b.24 f.1 1984-1987