

Guide to the Robert J. Gibson Collection of Lillian Russell Materials, 1894-1984

*T-Mss 1997-025

Billy Rose Theatre Division



The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

New York, New York

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Robert J. Gibson collection of Lillian Russell materials, 1894-1984

Collection ID: *T-Mss 1997-025

Creator: Gibson, Robert J.

Extent: .75 linear feet (2 boxes)

Repository: The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Billy Rose Theatre Division.

Abstract: Robert J. Gibson collected this material on Lillian and Dorothy Russell. This is a small collection notable mainly for the unpublished biography of Lillian and her daughter Dorothy Russell and letters written by Lillian Russell to her daughter and her sister Susan Westford.

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open to the public. Photocopying prohibited. Advance notice required

Publication Rights: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

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Biographical Note

Lillian Russell, actress and singer, the first great prima donna of the American musical stage, known as "The American Beauty" and "Airy Fairy Lillian," was born Helen Louise Leonard in Clinton, Iowa, December 4, 1861. Her father was an owner and editor of a local newspaper and her mother was an advocate of women's rights. She grew up with her mother in Chicago and New York after her parents' divorce. She made her professional debut in the chorus of an 1879 production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* and then appeared in vaudeville at Tony Pastor's Theater under the stage name Lillian Russell. She played in England as well as the United States and soon made a name for herself in burlesque and light opera. By the end of the century she had starred in 24 musicals including *Polly*, *Pepita*, *Dorothy*, *The Grand Duchess*, *Princess Nicotine*, *An American Beauty*, and *The Wedding Day*, many written expressly for her.

Known for her flamboyant personality as well as her beauty, Russell was notorious for not paying bills or honoring contracts and walking out on shows and husbands. Of the latter, she had four. By the turn of the century with her popularity on the wane somewhat, she joined Weber and Fields music hall, remaining there until 1903. The only song she ever recorded: *Come Down, My Evening Star*, was from their 1902 production of *Twirly-Whirly*. In 1904 she starred in *Lady Teazle*, a musical version of *The School for Scandal*, that was written for her. This was her last performance in a musical except for a reunion appearance with Weber and Fields in 1912. For the remainder of her life she continued in straight plays and vaudeville. She died on June 6, 1922 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Lillian Russell had one daughter born ca. 1883 and named for her mother, who later took the stage name of Dorothy Russell. Dorothy's stage career was short and unsuccessful. She was best known as the doted-on daughter of her famous mother and for her escapades that were reported in the press. She had six husbands and died on June 8, 1954.

Scope and Content Note

In his efforts to write a biography of Lillian and Dorothy Russell, Robert J. Gibson came into possession of some manuscript letters by Lillian Russell mainly to her sister Susan or her daughter Dorothy, letters to Dorothy primarily from her stepfather Alex Moore, and letters from James F. Gibson, who may have been one of Dorothy's husbands, to his wife. Some of the letters are stamped "Orphans Court of Allegheny Co. March 5, 1931" and were probably purchased by Gibson years later. The collection includes these as well as ephemera he collected and the typescript biography in various drafts that he wrote. This unpublished biography, *The Shadow of a Star* includes Part I. *The Star* (on Lillian as told to Gibson by her daughter, Dorothy) and Part II. *The Shadow* (on Dorothy).

The collection also includes a series of photographs, many inscribed to J. Vandervoort Sloan. Jack Sloan (1881-1930) was a theatrical manager for the actor William Faversham, as well as a reviewer for *Drama Magazine*, and a Chicago theater manager. The pictures include many noted actors and opera singers of the time including the two Russells. Gibson received these and the autographs from Sloan's nephew, James McCrea, in response to his inquiry in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1984 seeking photographs, letters or personal recollections for a biography on Dorothy Russell.

Organization

The collection is organized into three series and two sub-series. The are:

- Series I: Correspondence and Personal Papers
- Series II: Writings
- Series III: Collection Materials
 - Sub-series 1 - Correspondence of Lillian and Dorothy Russell
 - Sub-series 2 - Ephemera

Series Descriptions and Container Listing

Series I: Correspondence and personal papers, ca. 1930-1984

2 folders

The Gibson correspondence reflects his efforts to collect material on Lillian and Dorothy Russell in order to write a biography. Included as well are two personal items: a certificate of church membership and a pamphlet of poems by Gibson.

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|-----------|--|
| b. 1 f. 1 | Correspondence / Robert J. Gibson, 1955-1984
1 folder
Correspondence of Robert J. Gibson concerning his work collecting material on Lillian and Dorothy Russell. |
| b. 1 f. 2 | Personal papers / Robert J. Gibson, 1930; 1967
1 folder
Consists of a certificate of church membership [1930] and a pamphlet [1967] of poems by Gibson. |

Series II: Writings, Undated

8 folders

Consists of typescript drafts of his unpublished book, *The Shadow of a Star: Part. I. The Star (Lillian)* and *Part II. The Shadow (Dorothy)*, some with handwritten revisions, typescript drafts of an article he wrote on Lillian Russell, and related notes.

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|-----------|---|
| b. 1 f. 3 | <i>Lillian Russell, the lady behind the legend</i> / Robert J. Gibson
1 folder
Typescript article [n.d.] in two versions. |
| b. 1 f. 4 | <i>Lillian Russell, the lady behind the legend</i> / Robert J. Gibson
1 folder
Typescript notes [n.d.] for Gibson's article on Lillian Russell. |
| b. 1 f. 5 | Writings on Lillian and Dorothy Russell / Robert J. Gibson |

- 1 folder
Notes and drafts [fragment, n.d.] for Gibson's biography of Lillian and Dorothy Russell.
- b. 1 f. 6 ***The shadow of a star* / Robert J. Gibson**
1 folder
Typescript [n.d.] of *The Shadow of a Star: Part I--The Star*, The life of Lillian Russell as told by her daughter to Robert J. Gibson.
- b. 1 f. 7 ***The shadow of a star* / Robert J. Gibson**
1 folder
Carbon typescript with a few handwritten revisions [n.d.] of *The Shadow of a Star: Part I--The Star* (the life of Lillian Russell).
- b. 1 f. 8 ***The shadow of a star* / Robert J. Gibson**
1 folder
Carbon typescript [n.d.] of *The Shadow of a Star: Part II--The Shadow* (the life of Dorothy Russell).
- b. 1 f. 9 ***The shadow of a star* / Robert J. Gibson**
1 folder
Typescript [n.d., incomplete] of *The Shadow of a Star: Part II--The Shadow* (the life of Dorothy Russell).
- b. 1 f. 10 ***The shadow of a star* / Robert J. Gibson**
1 folder
Typescript pages with handwritten revisions [n.d.] for *The Shadow of a Star: Part II--The Shadow* (the life of Dorothy Russell).

Series III: Collected materials

32 folders

This series is made up of the materials collected by Robert J. Gibson about Lillian and Dorothy Russell. Included is correspondence, photographs, clippings and programs.

Sub-series 1 - Correspondence of Lillian and Dorothy Russell, ca. 1894-1929

7 folders

This series consist of letters from Lillian Russell to her sister Susan, and her daughter Dorothy; letters from Alex Moore (Lillian Russell's fourth and last husband), to Dorothy; letters from James F. Gibson to his wife, perhaps Dorothy; a fan letter to Lillian and letters on financial problems to Dorothy.

- b. 1 f. 11 Correspondence / Sydney Grundy, 1894 Sept. 8,
1 folder
Letter to Lillian Russell.
- b. 1 f. 12 Correspondence / Lillian Russell, 1901-1922; undated
1 folder
Four letters to her daughter, Dorothy.
- b. 1 f. 13 Correspondence / Lillian Russell, 1913-1921; undated
1 folder
Letters to her sister, Susan Westford.
- b. 1 f. 14 Correspondence / Lillian Russell
1 folder
Fragment of letter [n.d.] to Howard.
- b. 1 f. 15 Correspondence / James F. Gibson
1 folder
Six letters [n.d.] by James Gibson, who may have been one of Dorothy Russell's husbands, to his wife, and one to a Miss Johnston.
- b. 1 f. 16 Correspondence / Alexander Pollack Moore, 1923-1929
1 folder
Five letters on U.S. Embassy stationery signed "Father" to Dorothy Russell from her step-father, Alex Moore.
- b. 1 f. 17 Correspondence / Dorothy Russell
1 folder
Two letters [n.d.] to Dorothy Russell on financial problems.

Sub-series 2 - Ephemera, ca. 1886-1954

25 folders

This series includes a few photocopied clippings on Lillian Russell, material relating to the funerals of both Russells, incorporation papers for the Workingmen's Free Library, 1896, by Cynthia Leonard, Lillian Russell's mother, among others, the souvenir program for the farewell week of the Boston Museum theater, 1903, autographs of stars of the period, addressed envelopes and the photographs of actors and opera singers primarily inscribed to J. Vandervoort Sloan.

- b. 1 f. 18 Clippings / Lillian Russell, 1936-1967
1 folder
- b. 1 f. 19 Ephemera / Lillian Russell, 1922; 1954
1 folder
Mementoes from the funerals of both Lillian and Dorothy Russell.
- b. 2 f. 1 Records / Workingmen's Free Library (New York, N.Y.), 1886
1 folder
Incorporation papers for the Library, signed by Cynthia Leonard, Lillian Russell's mother, among others.
- b. 2 f. 2 Souvenir program / Boston Museum (1847-1903), 1903
1 folder
Souvenir program for the farewell week of the Boston Museum includes a history of the theater.
- b. 2 f. 3 Miscellaneous autographs, 1896 and undated
1 folder
Six miscellaneous autographs.
- b. 2 f. 4 Miscellaneous envelopes, 1921-1930
1 folder
Miscellaneous envelopes, most addressed to Dorothy Russell, two to Susan Westford.
- b. 2 f. 5 Photographs / Dorothy Russell
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] of Dorothy Russell.
- b. 2 f. 6 Photographs / Lillian Russell, 1890-1921 and undated
1 folder
Photographs of Lillian Russell, includes one inscribed to Vandervoort Sloan.

- b. 2 f. 7 **Photographs / Margaret Anglin**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] of Margaret Anglin.
- b. 2 f. 8 **Photographs / Mrs. Patrick Campbell**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] of Mrs. Patrick Campbell.
- b. 2 f. 9 **Photographs / Eleanor Carey**
1 folder
One signed photograph [n.d.] of Eleanor Carey.
- b. 2 f. 10 **Photographs / Mrs. Leslie Carter**
1 folder
Three photographs [n.d.] of Leslie Carter, one inscribed to John Vandervoort Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 11 **Photographs / Lina Cavalieri, 1917**
1 folder
One photograph of Lina Cavalieri inscribed to Vandervoort Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 12 **Photographs / Anna Fitziu**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] of Anna Fitziu inscribed to John Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 13 **Photographs / Mary Garden, 1919 and undated**
1 folder
Two photographs of Mary Garden inscribed to Vandervoort Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 14 **Portrait / Richard Mansfield**
1 folder
One etching [n.d.] with Mansfield's autograph.
- b. 2 f. 15 **Photographs / Dame Nellie Melba, 1917**
1 folder
- b. 2 f. 16 **Photographs / Lucien Muratore, 1917**
1 folder
One photograph of Lina Cavalieri's husband inscribed to Vandervort Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 17 **Photographs / Nance O'Neil**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] inscribed to Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 18 **Photographs / Hamilton Revelle**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] inscribed to Jack Sloan.
- b. 2 f. 19 **Photographs / Ruth St. Denis, ca. 1916-1927**
1 folder
Two signed photographs.
- b. 2 f. 20 **Photographs / Eva Tanguay**
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] inscribed to Mr. Sloan.

b. 2 f. 21

Photographs / Fay Templeton
1 folder
One signed photograph [n.d.].

b. 2 f. 22

Photographs / Bessie Tyree
1 folder
One photograph [n.d.] inscribed to J. Vandervoort Sloan.

b. 2 f. 23

Unidentified performers photographs, 1909-1917 and undated
1 folder
Photographs, most inscribed to J. Vandervoort Sloan.
