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**CLAUDIA McNEIL
SCRAPBOOKS**

**The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research
In Black Culture
515 Malcolm X Boulevard
New York, New York**

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Preface

This inventory was prepared as part of an archival preservation project to arrange, describe and catalog resources essential for the study of African-American theater history. The necessary staff and supplies for the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collection Project* were made available through a combination of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the City of New York.

**CLAUDIA McNEIL (1917-1993). SCRAPBOOKS (1938-1981).
3 boxes. (11 lin. in.).**

Claudia (Mae) McNeil, the internationally acclaimed performer of stage, screen, radio, and television is most identified with the role she created as Mama, Lena Younger in award winning playwright Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In the Sun*. Before she became a prominent actress, McNeil was known as the "Marian Anderson of Night Clubs," (because of her contralto voice), specializing in songs sung by Ethel Waters, until bronchial asthma, throat problems, and her acting career overshadowed her singing career.

When she was eight years old, composer Eubie Blake took a special interest in McNeil. She had written to him expressing her desire to study under his tutelage after seeing his name in a newspaper article. Blake subsequently secured her mother's consent and gave her free voice lessons; twice a week for ten years. According to an associate, while in her teens, McNeil appeared at the Apollo Theater's Amateur Night where she sang "Pennies from Heaven." The audience threw pennies on stage as she sang and Chick Webb, the famous bandleader and drummer, took notice.

In 1934, at age eighteen, McNeil had her first professional singing engagement at the Black Cat Café in Greenwich Village. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson encouraged her to leave the Black Cat and join him at the Mingo Club Revue where they did a song-and-dance routine and toured in his revue "Hot from Harlem." Some time after that she sang on the concert stage under the stewardship of entrepreneur Sol Hurok. However, she gave that up and traveled around the nation, Canada and London singing in nightclubs, performing in vaudeville acts, burlesque shows, and USO shows with various performers such as Art Tatum, Coleman Hawkins, Billie Daniels, "Red" Allen, and Billie Holiday, among others. During World War II, McNeil married a soldier who died in the war, obtained a singing contract with the Cook Recording Company, and is reported to have quit a \$400 a week singing engagement to study acting for six years with the Russian actress Maria Ouspenskaya.

By the late 1940s, early 1950s McNeil began her acting career and had appeared in several Duxbury Playhouse summer stock productions in Massachusetts - *Hey Holiday*, *Vaudeville*, and *Tammy* - that were usually associated with lyricist/composer Al Moritz. She also performed in *Claudia's Blues* by Al Moritz in summer stock at the American Lyric Theatre Provincetown Playhouse. Her first Off-Broadway role was in a production of *Greener Grass* at the Actors Studio.

In 1950 McNeil signed a contract to go on tour throughout South America and the Caribbean with Katherine Dunham and her dance troupe. While in Jamaica on a four-week vacation from the tour in 1951 McNeil accepted an invitation from sales manager, Mickey Hendricks, to appear on the Jamaican Broadcasting Company Radio Network. Subsequently, she decided to take a leave of absence from the tour and obtained a release from her contract. She then returned to Jamaica and joined the network as an entertainer, music director, and finally program director. Although her tenure there was brief, McNeil won the British award for her program, "Luncheon with Claudia," wrote articles for the monthly magazine, *Caribbean Woman*, and participated in benefits for hurricane relief. Due to ill health and problems with her visa, she returned to the United

States in late 1952 and resumed her nightclub performances in Harlem, Brooklyn, and Greenwich Village.

In 1953 while visiting the Negro Actors Guild, McNeil heard that producer Kermit Bloom Garden was searching for an actress who could speak with a West Indian accent. She auditioned (at the urging of the actor Arthur Kennedy) for the part of "Tituba," a West Indian slave in Arthur Miller's, *The Crucible*. She won the part of understudy and later made her Broadway debut in what became a Tony Award winning play. The play ran on Broadway for six months before completing a national tour.

Between acting roles, McNeil received a library degree and was employed at Womrath's bookstore in New York. She was also a guest writer for Alvin "Chick" Webb's *Footlights and Sidelights* column in the *Amsterdam News* during his absence in 1954 and replaced him as a guest columnist when he resigned from the paper a year later.

By 1957 McNeil was again actively seeking employment in the performing arts. Through her American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) membership, McNeil gave a six-minute performance before various talent agents. In the spring she starred in the Off-Broadway production of *Simply Heavenly*, as Mami, a role created for her by Langston Hughes that won McNeil critical acclaim. She also recorded the musical for Columbia Records and was in the television *Play of the Week* version (1959). That same year McNeil debuted in the film, *Last Angry Man* with Oscar winner Paul Muni in the feature role. The film received the December Blue Ribbon Award from the National Screen Council Members.

As a result of her AGVA performance McNeil appeared as a guest on several television shows: *Molly Goldberg Show*, *Camera Three*, *Personal Story*, *Arlene Frances Show*, *Spotlight*, *PM*, *The Goldbergs*, and reprised Ethel Water's (who some say was her mentor) role as Berenice in *Member of the Wedding*. In 1958 she appeared on Broadway in *Winesburg, Ohio* with Dorothy McGuire and James Whitmore. Additionally, that year Elia Kazan selected her for a part in Archibald MacLeish's *J. B.*, however, a young playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, approached McNeil about a role in her drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*, based on the poem, "Harlem," by Hughes. Kazan released McNeil from her contract and she opened in Hansberry's play.

A Raisin in the Sun, directed by Lloyd Richards, had a trial period in New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago before opening on Broadway in March 1959 at the Barrymore Theatre. Because of her stirring performance, in September, McNeil received star billing on the theatre's marquee along with co-stars, Ruby Dee, Sidney Poitier, and Diana Sands. According to some newspapers the play paid off its 147 investors in five weeks and with the 200th performance made a 343 per cent profit in twenty-five weeks; culminating in 538 Broadway performances. It received four Tony nominations: Best Play, McNeil and Poitier for Best Actress and Actor, respectively, and Richards for Best Director, but won no awards. After an eighteen month run on Broadway the original cast toured Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Saint Louis, Saint Paul, San Francisco, and Toronto, Canada. Shortly after the tour ended Columbia Studios commissioned the original company including Hansberry, to write the screenplay, for the play's film version (1961). In addition to the television shows previously mentioned, McNeil's other television credits include: *The Sand Pile*, *Look Up and Live* (1959); *Salute to the American Theatre*, *The Doctors/Nurses* (1960)

(she received an Emmy nomination for the episode, *Express Stop from Lenox Avenue* 1963); *Profiles in Courage* (1965); *New York Confidential*, and *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* (1967). She also appeared in: *Incident in San Francisco* (1971); *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, *Mod Squad*, and *Moon of the Wolf* (1972); *Cry Panic* (1974); *Kups Show* (1975); *American Woman: Portraits of Courage* (1976); *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1978); *Roots: The Next Generation*, *Dancing Willie* (1979); *Palmerstown USA* (1980); and *Mississippi* (1983).

On Broadway McNeil costarred with Diana Sands and Alvin Ailey in Peter Feibleman's *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright* for which she received another Tony nomination, but did not win an award (1962). In 1965 she toured abroad to Paris, Israel, Edinburgh, and London (where she received the Critics Poll Award for best actress) to star as Sister Margaret in James Baldwin's *Amen Corner*. Her next Broadway appearance was in Carl Reiner's *Something Different* (1967), followed by the musical, *Her First Roman*, also starring Leslie Uggams and Richard Kiley (1968), John Golden's *Wrong Way Light Bulb* (1969), and *To Be Young Gifted and Black* (1981). McNeil's other Off-Broadway roles include: *Moon on Rainbow Shawl* (1961), two of three one-act plays in Ted Shine's *Contribution* (1970), and summer stock in *Horowitz and Mrs. Washington* (1980). She participated in a Tribute to Lorraine Hansberry for the Black Arts Festival at Lincoln Center (1972) with other actors who knew and worked with the author, playwright, and activist who died of cancer in 1965. McNeil also reprised the role of Mama in several revivals of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

McNeil appeared in only four films. The other two were *There Was A Crooked Man* (1970) and *Black Girl* (1972). In 1978 McNeil revived her Ethel Waters repertoire for a cabaret act at Michael's Pub in Greenwich Village and slimmed down to the weight she had during her earlier singing career. By the following year her health had declined and although she received an invitation to audition and subsequently rehearsed for a part in the Broadway production of *Death and King's Horseman*, she had to withdraw from the play. Three years later McNeil was hospitalized for diabetes and her left leg was amputated. Unable to work, she retired to the Actors Fund Nursing Home in Englewood, New Jersey where she died on Thanksgiving Day 1993.

McNeil was born in August 1917, in Baltimore, Maryland to Annie Mae (a six foot four mixed Apache Indian) and Marvin Spencer McNeil (an African-American). Shortly after the family moved to New York City her parents separated and then divorced. To support herself and her children McNeil's mother owned a grocery store. During summers, McNeil's mother sent her to Baltimore, Maryland to attend school. When her mother died the Toppers, a Jewish couple who was a friend of Mrs. McNeil, adopted Claudia at the age of twelve. Originally Baptist, under the Topper's tutelage, Claudia became fluent in Yiddish; studied Judaism, sang at Bar Mitzvahs, although she later converted to Catholicism. McNeil's second marriage to Herman McCoy in 1962 ended in divorce after two years.

Claudia McNeil was a member of the Actors' Equity Association, American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, Negro Actors Guild, and the Screen Actors Guild. She received awards from the Drifters Inc., the National Council of Negro Women (1959),

American Jewish Congress and Allied Jewish Appeal, and was a participant in many benefits.

Scope and Content Note

The Claudia McNeil Scrapbooks, donated by The Actors' Fund of America after McNeil's death, were created by the late performer during the course of her career and consist of twelve volumes spanning the years 1938 to 1981. The contents include newspaper and magazine feature articles, reviews, advertisements, programs, poems, telegrams, letters, photographs, greeting cards, and handwritten notes arranged chronologically by her engagements or performances, with the predominate amount of material documenting her arrival at the pinnacle of her career in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Most of the nine original scrapbooks exist except one. Four scrapbooks covering the years 1945 to 1958 were photocopied and are withdrawn from public use due to their brittle and fragile condition. Scrapbooks 1 to 3 cover her early career as a singer, dancer, her forays with summer stock productions, and her travel with the Katherine Dunham Revue in Latin America and the Caribbean. Her Broadway debut in *The Crucible* can also be found here.

Scrapbooks 4 to 8 capture those aspects of McNeil's career that became her theatrical legacy - her role as Mama Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. These volumes highlight McNeil's and others' role in that Broadway production, the tour, and movie as well as other early theatre and film ventures. Photocopies from the Wedding Album comprise scrapbook 9.

Some loose items were found in the scrapbooks and were placed in folders 10 to 13 that primarily document her role in *A Raisin in the Sun* revivals, *Amen Corner*, *Horowitz and Mrs. Washington*, films, plus sundry personal achievements.

Provenance

Gift of the Actors' Fund of America
SCM 95-10

Processed by Paula Williams
September 1999

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Scrapbook</u>	<u>Contents</u>
1	1*	1945-1949 Club engagements: (Copacabana, Village Corners, Club Bali, Smalls' Paradise, Club Riviera radio transcript) and reviews, photographs and flyers Programs: <i>Hey Holiday</i> , <i>The Wishing Stone</i> , <i>Vaudeville</i> (photographs), and <i>Tammy</i> Joe Louis Souvenir Journal; Marrow Testimonial Banquet Programme; telegrams; and letters
3	2+	1950-1957 Newspaper clipping: <i>Greener Grass</i> (1950); flyers, greeting cards, copy of contract, advertisements, letters, telegrams, and postcards Katherine Dunham Revue: programs, advertisements, flyers, notes, newspaper clippings from Caribbean newspapers, 1951; Jazz Magazine (1950), photographs and menu
1	3*	1951-1957 Club engagements and reviews; photographs, reviews and handwritten notes (<i>Strictly French</i>) Playbill and articles: <i>The Crucible</i> Programs: <i>The Male Animal</i> and AGVA; letter and telegram
2	4+	1957, 1958 Feature articles, reviews, advertisements, flyer: <i>Simply Heavenly</i> , <i>The Member of the Wedding</i> , <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> , and <i>Last Angry Man</i> Playbill: <i>Winesbury, Ohio</i> , reviews
1	5	1959 <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> , play and movie reviews plus feature articles: Sidney Poitier, McNeil, and cast

* Photocopies of original items housed in Box 3

+ Scrapbooks located in Box 3

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Scrapbook</u>	<u>Contents</u>
1	6*	1959-1961 Reviews of <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> , <i>Simply Heavenly</i> , <i>Last Angry Man</i> ; <i>A Salute to the American Theatre</i> ; advertisements and letter
2	7*	1959-1961 Advertisements, newspaper and magazine clippings re: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> ; reviews and articles on McNeil; advertisement for <i>Greyhound</i>
2	8+	1959-1966 <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Souvenir Journal Newspaper clippings: <i>Last Angry Man</i> , <i>Moon On a Rainbow Shawl</i> , <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Advertisements, article on Joshua Logan, Director, <i>Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright</i>
1	9	1966 Wedding Album
	<u>Folder</u>	
1	10	1960, 1981 Programs: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> , <i>Horowitz and Mrs. Washington</i> , Honoring Ms. Claudia McNeil
	11	1965-1981 Newspaper clippings: <i>Amen Corner</i> Advertisement for <i>Black Girl</i> (1972); and <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Revival
	12	Photographs (photocopies)
	13	Miscellaneous

* Photocopies of original items housed in Box 3

+ Scrapbooks in Box 2

Box

3 CLOSED DUE TO FRAGILE CONDITION

SEPARATION RECORD

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers: Claudia McNeil Scrapbooks

Accession Number: SCM 95-10

Donor: Actors' Fund of America

Date received: April 1995

Date transferred: April 1995

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:

Twenty-four photographs of McNeil and others

Accessioned by: Diana Lachatanere

Date: April 1995