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

Gene Feist papers

1930s-2000 (bulk 1944-1997)

*T-Mss 1997-010

Compiled by Diana Bertolini, January 2011

Summary

Creator: Feist, Gene

Title: Gene Feist papers, 1930s-2000 (bulk 1944-1997)

Size: 28.29 linear feet (72 boxes)

Source: This collection was donated to the New York Public Library by Gene Feist in 2004.

Abstract: Gene Feist (1923-) is an American artistic director, playwright, producer, director and teacher. In 1965 he co-founded the Roundabout Theatre Company, of which he served as Artistic Director until 1988. The Gene Feist Papers document the personal and professional life Gene Feist and the history of the Roundabout Theatre Company. Types of materials in this collection include personal correspondence, production files, topical files, drafts of scripts, photographs, playbills and programs, reviews, publicity materials, business files and personal ephemera.

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

Preferred citation: Gene Feist Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Surrogates available: This collection includes audiocasettes.

Creator history

Gene Feist (1923-) is an American artistic director, playwright, producer, director, teacher and co-founder of the Roundabout Theatre Company. Feist was born in New York City on January 16, 1923. In 1951 he graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology with a BFA in Directing and Playwriting. The following year he received an MA from New York University in Educational Theatre. Over the next few years he studied with Lee Strasberg at the American Theatre Wing. In 1957, Feist married Kathe Snyder (Elizabeth Owens), an actress who frequently performed in early Roundabout Theatre productions. They have two daughters, Nicole and Gena.

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During the 1950s and early 1960s, Feist worked for several different theatre companies, serving as Producer and Resident Playwright for the Two by Four Theatre; as General Manager and Production Coordinator at the Stamford Playhouse; as Founder and Executive Producer of the Renata Theatre; as General Manager and Publicist at the Sharon Playhouse; and as Producer and Artistic Director of the New Theatre Nashville. From 1962-1964 he was a drama critic for the Chelsea-Clinton News. He was also writing constantly during this period and he directed his plays Lust for a Nightingale and A Toy for the Clowns at the Actors' Studio, and Wretched the Lionhearted at the East End Theatre.

Feist and his wife, actress Elizabeth Owens, conceived the idea of the nonprofit Roundabout Theatre Company in 1965. Feist wanted to do classic plays by authors like Ibsen and Shaw and thought that a subscription series at an affordable price would be of interest to New Yorkers. Roundabout's first production of Strindberg's The Father was presented in a 150-seat theatre in the basement of a supermarket in Chelsea. In that first season, the company had four hundred subscribers who paid only \$5.00 for three plays. In their early years, the Roundabout also produced original plays, which attracted well-known actors such as Kim Hunter, Vincent Price, Irene Worth, Tammy Grimes, Malcolm McDowell, and Philip Bosco.

While Roundabout was growing artistically, the company was struggling financially, filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1978. By 1983, the company had an accumulated \$2.5 million deficit on a \$1.5 million budget. Todd Haimes, came on board as Managing Director. Just two weeks later, the Board voted to close the theatre due to financial troubles. Board member Christian C. Yegen agreed to write checks to cover the payroll, and within two years, Roundabout emerged from Chapter 11 protection. In 1984, Roundabout staged its most acclaimed production up to that time, Peter Nichols' A Day in the Death of Joe Egg starring Jim Dale and Stockard Channing. The production moved to Broadway where it won the 1985 Tony®, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle Awards for Outstanding Revival. Roundabout's growth continued with the opening of the 17th Street Theatre on January 30, 1985 with The Playboy of the Western World, starring Kate Burton and Ken Marshall.

In 1989, Gene Feist retired and Todd Haimes was appointed Artistic Director, but Feist continued to work with the Roundabout in the official capacity of Founder and Consultant. During the five years that followed, Roundabout's productions were nominated for 79 awards, including Tonys®, Drama Desks, Outer Critics Circle and Olivier Awards. Harold Pinter's The Homecoming was followed by other acclaimed productions, such as Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit* with Jane Alexander and Eugene O'Neill's Anna Christie starring Natasha Richardson and Liam Neeson, which won the 1993 Tony, Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk Awards for Best Revival. Later that season, Haimes expanded the theatre's mission to produce musicals, and Roundabout introduced its Great American Musical series with, She Loves Me, directed by Scott Ellis and choreographed by Rob Marshall, which successfully transferred to Broadway and was also produced in London, where it received five Olivier awards. In September 1995 the Roundabout produced the American premiere of Harold Pinter's Moonlight, starring Jason Robards and Blythe Danner. Roundabout had some of their biggest hits with the Tony Award® winning revivals of Cabaret, starring Natasha Richardson and Alan Cumming and Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical Assassins, directed by Joe Mantello. Since 1965, the Roundabout has grown from a small, off-Broadway theatre into one of the leading cultural institutions in New York City.

^{*}From www.roundabouttheatre.org/history, retrieved 12/23/2010

Scope and content note

The Gene Feist Papers document the personal and professional life of American artistic director, playwright, producer, director, and teacher Gene Feist and the history of the Roundabout Theatre Company, one of New York's most acclaimed and successful non-for-profit theatre companies. Types of materials in this collection include personal correspondence, production files, topical files, drafts of scripts, photographs, playbills and programs, reviews, publicity materials, business files and personal ephemera.

Series I, Gene Feist consists of materials pertaining to Feist's personal and professional life apart from his work with the Roundabout Theatre Company. Feist's pre-Roundabout professional activities include his work as a playwright, critic, teacher, and director. This material includes correspondence with colleagues such as the renowned acting teachers Yale Wexler and Stella Adler, the latter of whom was also a longtime close personal friend of Feist and his wife. Correspondence with other friends includes, most substantially, letters to and from Thelma Laird Magers Lauer. Feist dated her in the 1940s and they remained lifelong friends after their marriages to other people. His extensive correspondence with her, over a period of fifty years, provides an invaluable autobiographical documentation of his adult life. Other correspondents include Feist's wife, Kathe, and their daughters, Gena and Nicole.

Feist's Writings consist mainly of drafts of plays Feist wrote, adapted or translated and his articles and reviews for the Chelsea-Clinton News. Other writings include drafts and excerpts from novels, short stories, and poems, his thesis, and a proposed nonfiction work on the history of the American theatre. There are also files and scrapbooks concerning, regional and community theatres, schools, and camps where Feist served as director, artistic director or producer. These include New Rochelle High School, Manitou-wabing Camp of Fine Arts in Parry Sound, Ontario and the New Theatre Nashville. There are also subject files on people, places, productions, schools as well as significant topics/events, such as Feist's teaching certifications.

Feist also worked on Theatron: A Festival of Four Staged Readings of New Israeli Plays, produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre, in association with the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Education. Of particular interest are several scripts of plays, in translation, by Israeli authors submitted to the Theatron for inclusion in the festival

Series II: Roundabout Theatre Company contains institutional files of the Roundabout, from its founding in 1965 through 2000. Materials include an extensive collection of production shots from Roundabout productions, as well as playbills, programs and posters. Other production files include scripts, correspondence, set designs and publicity materials. Company records include subject files on individuals and organizations with which the Roundabout had contact; business files, including contracts, negotiations, legal and financial records. Also included are administrative files on classes, conservatories and conferences run by the Roundabout, including transcripts of classes taught by Feist. Scrapbooks of articles, correspondence, designs and photographs document the Roundabout's moves over the years between seven different theatres in Chelsea and Midtown. The production shots, posters and playbills in this collection are an extraordinary resource, visually documenting the Roundabout's history from its inception through the 1990s. Although Feist stepped down as Artistic Director in 1988, this collection also covers the following 10 years, when Feist was still actively involved in the Roundabout's productions as a consultant.

Arrangement

The Gene Feist papers are organized into the following series:

Series I: Gene Feist, circa 1930-1996

Series II: Roundabout Theatre Company, 1965-2000

Key terms

Subjects

Dramatists, American

Theatrical producers and directors -- United States

-- 20th century

Names

Adler, Stella

Feist, Gene

Magers, Thelma Laird

Roundabout Theatre Company

Wexler, Yale

Special formats

Photographs

Playbills

Scripts (documents)

Sound recordings

Occupations

Playwrights

Theatrical producers and directors

Container list

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b.8 f.4	Fifty Grand
b.8 f.5	Gangster story
b.8 f.6	Golden Stranger
b.8 f.7-8	Governor's play
b.8 f.9	The Great Gatsby
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b.9 f.12	Leftover Life to Live
b.9 f.13-17	A Little Waltz, a Little Tango
b.9 f.18-19	Lust for the Nightingale
b.10 f.1-3	Lust for the Nightingale
b.10 f.4-5	Martha's play (Mirror)
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Plays (cont.)

	Plays (cont.)
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b.11 f.7	Toward No Spring
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b.12 f.2-3	We Arrive as Strangers
b.12 f.4-5	Weber and Fields
b.13 f.1	Welfare play
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b.13 f.8	You Need a Pogrom to Tell a Rabbi
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Series II: Roundabout Theatre Company (cont.) Photographs and slides of productions (cont.)

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b.48 f.24	The Taming of the Shrew, 1972
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b.72 f.13	You Never Can Tell, 1977
b.72 f.14	Unknown Productions, undated
b.72 f.15	Various Photographs, undated Includes behind the scenes shots and portraits (some autographed).
b.68 f.35	Various Photographs, undated
b.72 f.16-17	Slides, Multiple Productions, 1960s-1980s
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