



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

A. J. and Carrie Balaban papers

1903-1960s [bulk 1930-1946]

*T-Mss 1999-024

Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2013

Summary

Creator: Balaban, A. J. (Abraham Joseph), 1889-1962

Title: A. J. and Carrie Balaban papers

Date: 1903-1960s [bulk 1930-1946]

Size: 9.04 linear feet (28 boxes)

Source: Donated by Cherry Balaban Robins, and other family members, 2000, 2007, and 2008.

Abstract: The A. J. Balaban and Carrie Balaban papers document the Balaban family primarily through correspondence and family albums. The correspondence includes letters from the Balabans' daughter Cherry while she entertained with the USO during World War II, letters from friends living in Europe during World War II, and materials about the book entitled *Continuous Performance*, the autobiography of A. J. Balaban. The collection also holds information about the Balabans' involvement with the Church of Christ, Scientist. Photograph albums and scrapbooks about the family, a photograph album about Nora Bayes, and some records about A. J. Balaban's business activities are the remainder of the collection.

Conditions Governing Access:

Inquires regarding audio materials in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Division (theatrediv@nypl.org). Audio materials will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Conditions Governing Use: The author/creator retains copyright of materials. For information on obtaining permission to publish, contact the Theatre Division at theatrediv@nypl.org.

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Creator History

Abraham Joseph Balaban (1889-1962) was a Chicago businessman who pioneered live entertainment theatre experiences integrated with early motion pictures. Balaban, of Russian-Jewish descent, was the son of Israel Balaban and Augusta (Mendeburskey) Balaban, and the second of their eight children.

A. J. Balaban began his career as a performer in Chicago in 1907, appearing on stage with his sister, Ida. Shortly after their debut, A. J. and his older brother Barney rented the theatre to begin showing their own film and vaudeville programs. By the end of 1909, they opened a new theatre nearby, where they had complete control over operations and freedom to innovate services and attractions. In 1916, A. J. and Barney joined their brother-in-law Sam Katz to create the theatrical management firm Balaban & Katz. With increasing success and larger capitalization, Balaban & Katz began more than a decade of developing new and architecturally significant movie theatres--many designed by the noted firm Rapp & Rapp--primarily in Chicago and surrounding communities. As well, Balaban & Katz developed innovative connections between motion pictures and elaborately-designed vaudeville and stage performances featuring many of the leading entertainers of the day.

By 1924, Balaban & Katz was the most successful chain of movie theatres in the United States. Seeking even more dominance in film distribution and exhibition, in 1926 Balaban & Katz merged with Paramount/Publix, a rival chain of movie theatres connected with Paramount Pictures in Hollywood. As a result of the merger, A. J. moved to New York City in 1929 to serve as vice-president of Paramount/Publix's presentation unit, which maintained creative control over the elaborate stage shows made famous by Balaban & Katz. However, a heavy work load and changing tastes in entertainment were dispiriting to A. J. A year later he announced his retirement and moved his family and parents to Geneva, Switzerland. Although he returned to Chicago for a short period in the mid-1930s to develop another theatre with his brothers, he remained based in Europe until the outbreak of World War II. Returning to New York City, A. J. became manager of the struggling Roxy Theatre, which he soon transformed into a highly successful venue for film, popular musical performances, and even ice skating. In 1952, after ten years at the Roxy, Balaban retired again to Geneva with his family. He died on a trip to New York City on November 1, 1962.

In 1918, Balaban married Carrie (Strump) Balaban. Their three children were Ida Joy (b. 1922), Cherry Blossom (b. 1924), and Bruce (b. 1928).

Custodial History

Collection was maintained by Cherry Balaban Robins.

Scope and Content Note

The A. J. and Carrie Balaban papers are comprised of family papers, and some business records. The correspondence and photograph albums form the bulk of the collection. Carrie Balaban was the recipient of the earliest correspondence. Between 1908 to 1917, she received many letters from her brother Ben Myers, who had moved to Tyler, Texas. A typed transcription (not complete) is available. The correspondence also holds contemporary accounts of World War II. The Balabans' daughter Cherry, a USO entertainer, wrote frequently to both parents during World War II. Stationed in Florida, her letters indicate that she entertained the troops in Florida and in the Caribbean. Files from her USO tour include memorabilia, notes, skits, photographs, and a travel kit. Other non-family World War II material includes letters from friends and acquaintances that describe Europe's (mostly England's) wartime conditions. One poignant letter from the American Outpost in Great Britain, dated August 21,

1943, requests a small contribution, explaining that the American colony stayed through the blitz and lived with the British through the war. The most significant correspondents were Peter Bayes (a Captain in the U. S. Army stationed in Germany and France, and the son of Nora Bayes), Naomi Chanell, Poldi Long, and Hilary F. Page. Several of the letters have envelopes indicating the contents have been opened and examined by postal censors.

The general correspondence includes congratulatory telegrams about A. J. and Carrie's wedding and the birth of their first child, and a letter to A. J. from Carrie before their marriage. The collection also holds two audio recordings of Carrie Balaban. An enclosed letter with one recording from Frances Levine mentions the good that Carrie is doing for the "Foundation" (unspecified). Inquiries regarding audio materials in the collection may be directed to the Billy Rose Theatre Division (theatrediv@nypl.org). Audio materials will be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

One of the personal and professional highlights for the Balabans was the publication of the authorized biography of A. J. Balaban entitled *Continuous Performance* by Carrie Balaban (1942). The files for this publication contain letters, reviews and related materials. The family also created two scrapbooks mostly relating to the publication and a signed limited edition of the book. The collection also focuses on Christian Science. The correspondence holds information about Carrie's dedication to the church, to which she converted from Judaism in 1912. Both she and A. J. were eventually elevated to spiritual practitioners, and remained active supporters of the church. Additional information about Christian Science can be found in correspondence from friends.

The photograph albums offer the most complete visual documentation of the Balaban family over the decades. The photograph albums include images of both A. J. and Carrie Balaban from youth to adulthood, and chronicles their lives together after marriage. Photographs show their three children--especially their daughters Ida Joy and Cherry--at play, at school, at special events, and with their parents. The photograph albums also include the grandmothers and other relatives. While the Balabans lived in Geneva during the 1930s, they were photographed in Geneva and on travels throughout Europe. Additional photographs of the Balabans are located in the loose images. These files also include photographs of Ethel Leginska, the British pianist and composer; vaudeville entertainer Sophie Tucker; and a photograph album dedicated to the theatrical career of Nora Bayes, with whom the Balabans had a close relationship.

Balaban & Katz records contain little documentation of A. J. Balaban's professional career. The files are mostly business records, printed matter and photographs. The remaining material includes a memory book for A. J. Balaban's funeral and a tribute book presented to him before he left for New York.

Arrangement: This collection is arranged by name and/or subject.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Artifacts
Correspondence
Photographs
Scrapbooks

Subjects

Christian Scientists -- United States

World War II -- Personal narratives

Occupations

Producers (managers)

Names

Balaban, Carrie

Robins, Cherry Balaban

Tucker, Sophie, 1884-1966

Balaban & Katz

United Service Organizations (U.S.)

Container List

Cherry Balaban

- b. 1 f. 1-11 Correspondence 1930s-1940s
The bulk of the letters were written by Cherry Balaban, while an entertainer in the USO tours in Florida and the Caribbean during World War II. There is also information about her high school, Brentwood Hall, and her song "Blind Date."
- b. 2 f. 1-4 Correspondence 1940s
- b. 2 f. 5 Official Documents for Travel 1940s
- b. 2 f. 6-10 USO Tour 1930s-1940s
- b. 12 f. 1-3 USO Tour 1940s
- b. 2 f. 11 Post-USO Tour Letter 1948

Bruce Balaban

- b. 2 f. 12 Correspondence 1930s-1940s, 1960s
- b. 3 f. 1 School Projects and Reports 1930s-1940s

Ida Joy Balaban

- b. 3 f. 3 Letters and Articles about Her Performances in Quebec 1920s, 1940s

A. J. and Carrie Balaban

- b. 3 f. 3-9 General Correspondence 1910-1960s
- b. 4 f. 1-2 General Correspondence 1940s-1960s
- b. 26 f. 1-2 General Correspondence 1939-1944
- b. 4 f. 3-7 Bayes, Peter 1943-1945
- b. 4 f. 8 Berg, Gertrude 1953
- b. 4 f. 8 Chanell, Naomi 1943-1947
- b. 4 f. 9-14 Christian Science 1912-1940s
- b. 5 f. 1-6 *Continuous Performance* 1940s-1950s
- b. 23 *Continuous Performance* 1942-1945
Scrapbook.
- b. 6 f. 1 de Rougemont, Priscilla 1946-1947
- b. 6 f. 2 Drivers License and Registration Card 1938-1939
- b. 6 f. 3 Dorset Hotel 1940-1945
- b. 6 f. 4 Goodman, Lillian Rosedale 1930s-1960s
- b. 6 f. 5 Hall, Peggy 1945-1946
- b. 6 f. 6 Hamilton, Ira 1935
- b. 6 f. 7 Kendall, C. and T 1939-1946
- b. 6 f. 8 Long, Poldi 1941-1942
- b. 6 f. 9 Manchester, Elizabeth 1935
- b. 6 f. 8-15 Meyers, Ben 1908-1910
- b. 7 f. 1-11 Meyers, Ben 1910-1913
These folders hold a partial typed transcription of Meyers' letters.
- b. 7 f. 12-13 Meyers, Gertrude 1913-1917
- b. 8 f. 1-2 Meyers, Sam C 1930s
- b. 8 f. 3 Minckler, Kate Whitmore 1935-1945

A. J. and Carrie Balaban (cont.)

- b. 8 f. 4 Morris, Ruth 1930s
- b. 8 f. 5 Morton, Marie L 1932-1942
- b. 8 f. 6-7 Page, Hilary F 1940-1945
- b. 8 f. 8 Parkhurst, Helen 1941-1945
- b. 8 f. 9 Parks, Mary Chandler 1932-1935
- b. 8 f. 10 Stout, Rex 1943
- b. 8 f. 11 Wood, Helen 1935-1944
- b. 8 f. 12 Yamanaka, Ray 1923-1929
- b. 8 f. 13 Assorted Materials 1930s, 1960s
Contains a patent for a gas mask, a program for George M. Cohan & Sam H. Harris, and information about a banquet and circus for the Balabans.
- b. 8 f. 14-15 Carrie Balaban's Writings 1930s-1940s
 - b. 9 f. 1 Memorial Book for A. J. Balaban 1962
 - b. 9 f. 3-4 Carrie Balaban's Address Book undated
 - b. 9 f. 5 Sarah Bernhardt Play 1918
Entitled *The Star in the Night*.
 - b. 9 f. 6 Assorted Programs 1920s-1960s
Programs are from the Thanksgiving Day Dinner at the American Society in London (1938), cruise materials, and a dance.
 - b. 9 f. 7 *Worth (Paris, France)--The History of Feminine Fashion* 1928
Monograph.

Photographs and Scrapbooks

- b. 10 Photograph Album 1915-1930
 - b. 11 Photograph Albums 1920s
 - b. 12 Photograph Album 1920s
 - b. 13 Photograph Album 1930s
 - b. 14 Photograph Albums 1930s
 - b. 15 Photograph Album 1940s
- Balaban Family
- b. 16 f. 1 Balaban, A. J. and Barney 1903
 - b. 16 f. 2-3 Balaban, A. J 1920s-1940s
 - b. 18 f. 1 Balaban, A. J 1920s
 - b. 16 f. 4 Balaban, A. J. and Carrie 1950s
 - b. 16 f. 5-9 Balaban, Carrie 1910-1940s
 - b. 18 f. 2 Balaban, Carrie 1912
 - b. 17 f. 1-3 Balaban, Cherry 1940s
 - b. 17 f. 4 Balaban, Goldie 1930s
 - b. 17 f. 5 Balaban, Ida Joy 1931-1936
 - b. 18 f. 3 Balaban Children and Cousins 1933
 - b. 17 f. 6-8 Balaban Family and Friends 1920s
 - b. 17 f. 9 Balaban, Ida 1920
- Balaban Family, Other Individuals, and Topics
- b. 27 f. 1 Ash, Paul and Ida undated

Photographs and Scrapbooks (cont.)

Balaban Family, Other Individuals, and Topics (cont.)

- b. 27 f. 2 Barrymore, Ethel undated
- b. 27 f. 3-16 Bayes, Nora 1920s
- b. 28 f. 1 Bayes, Nora 1928
Memorial album.
- b. 18 f. 4 Biala, Sara 1922
- b. 18 f. 5 Circus 1929
- b. 18 f. 6 Fisher, Harry 1926
- b. 18 f. 7 Freeman undated
- b. 18 f. 8 Grauman, Sid undated
- b. 18 f. 9 Landers, Harry with His Sister 1930
- b. 18 f. 10 Leginska, Ethel 1944
- b. 27 f. 17 Leslie, Amy 1929
- b. 18 f. 11 Night Clubs 1940s
- b. 18 f. 12 Silver, Morris 1925
- b. 18 f. 13-14 Tucker, Sophie 1930s, 1950s
Includes a letter written by Tucker.
- b. 27 f. 18 Tucker, Sophie undated
- b. 18 f. 15-16 Unidentified Photographs undated
 - b. 19 Scrapbook 1929
 - b. 20 Scrapbooks 1929
 - b. 21 *Variety Magazine* 1929
Bound original issue dedicated to A. J. Balaban.
 - b. 21 Scrapbook 1930s
 - b. 22 Scrapbook 1940s
Includes letters from servicemen regarding *Continuous Performance*.
 - b. 23 Scrapbook 1942-1945

A. J. Balaban Business Records

- b. 24 f. 1 [The] Blue Network 1945-1952
- b. 24 f. 2-8 Balaban & Katz Theatres 1924-1927
Production books.
- b. 24 f. 9 Balaban Theatres 1930s, undated
The photographs include pictures of the first and second theatres and a presentation of plaques.
- b. 18 f. 17-19 Balaban Theatres undated (Oversize photographs.)
- b. 24 f. 10 Publix and Paramount Corporation 1930
- b. 25 f. 1 Recommendations for Acts for Shorts 1930s
- b. 25 f. 2-3 Roxy Theatre 1940s
Cost estimates and photographs.
- b. 25 f. 4 Short Subjects Productions circa 1929
- b. 25 f. 5-6 Testimonial Dinner for A. J. Balaban 1929
- b. 25 f. 7 Vitaphone Sound System 1930s
Promotional materials.
- b. 25 f. 8 Assorted Printed Matter undated

Assorted Material

Assorted Material (cont.)

- b. 27 f. 19 **Sheet Music** undated
 “Dirty Hands! Dirty Face!” sung by Miss Nora Bayes; “Blue Danube Blues,” music by Jerome Kern.
- b. 27 f. 20 **Article** 1949
 “The Story of Christian Science,” *Look* magazine.