



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Dora Weissman papers

1880s-1973 [bulk 1930-1966]

Compiled by Kit Fluker.

Summary

Creator: Weissman, Dora, -1974

Title: Dora Weissman papers

Date: 1880s-1973 [bulk 1930-1966]

Size: 14.48 linear feet (36 boxes)

Source: Gift of an unknown donor, 1981.

Abstract: Dora Weissman (d. 1974) was an actor in American Yiddish theater and English-language theater, radio, television, and film. The Dora Weissman papers document her acting career; her work as a talent agent and as an acting coach; her relationships with friends, family, and colleagues; and her activities in the Jewish theatrical community. The collection dates from the 1880s to 1973, with the bulk of material dating from the 1930s to the 1960s. Materials include photographs, scripts, correspondence, event and theater programs, scrapbooks, and Weissman's notes. Materials are chiefly in English but also in Yiddish. The collection holds scripts by Weissman's father, Yiddish playwright and translator Reuben Weissman, dating between the 1880s and 1912.

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Processing note: Materials were originally loose or in envelopes, binders, and folders, mostly unlabeled and with little internal order. Materials were placed in new folders, and loose materials were sorted into broad categories. Compiled by Kit Fluker.

Creator History

Dora Weissman (d. 1974) was an actor in American Yiddish theater and English-language theater, radio, television, and film. Her father, Reuben Weissman, was a playwright, translator, and prompter in the Yiddish theater in New York City. He was also an organizer of the Hebrew Actors Union and a founder of the Yiddish Theatrical Alliance. Dora Weissman first began acting as a child in her father's

productions, appearing on stage with leading Jewish actors such as Jacob P. Adler and Bertha Kalich. Later, she became a leading soubrette in the Yiddish theater.

Weissman earned a degree at Hunter College, and then attended medical school for two years before returning to the stage. In 1921, she married Yiddish playwright, director, and theater manager Anshel Schorr. Schorr was manager of the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia from 1912 to 1927, and of the Liberty Theatre in Brooklyn from 1927 to 1928; he featured Weissman in many of his productions. Together, Weissman and Schorr toured Europe in 1928 and Argentina in the early 1930s. Schorr died in 1942.

Weissman had her English-language debut on Broadway in 1937 in *Hitch Your Wagon*, directed by Garson Kanin. She had a leading role in *The Jazz Singer* (1945) at the Brighton Theater in Brooklyn and appeared on Broadway in 1946 in *A Flag is Born*. In 1961, she took over Gertrude Berg's leading role for the touring production of *A Majority of One*.

Weissman acted in numerous radio shows and television shows throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Her best-known role was Mrs. Herman in *The Goldbergs* television series, created by Gertrude Berg. Weissman had previously played multiple parts in the *Goldbergs* radio show, and also acted in Berg's radio show *The House of Glass*, which ran from 1953 to 1954. In the 1950s, Weissman had roles in television anthology programs such as *The Philco Television Playhouse* and *Kraft Television Theatre*. In 1971, she appeared in the feature films *The Panic in Needle Park* and *The Hospital*.

During World War II, Weissman was chairman of the Jewish theater divisions of the War Loan Bond Drive and of the Hospitalized Service Men and Women Committee. She founded the Ladies' Welfare League of the Yiddish Theatrical Alliance, serving as president of the League from 1939 to 1942, and "grand president" in 1943.

In 1945, Weissman created the Dora Weissman School of Theatre Arts (originally called the New Theatre Arts School), where she gave acting and voice lessons to children and adults. Actor Gubi Mann was associate director. From 1948 through the 1960s, Weissman worked as a talent agent, chiefly representing children and teenagers. Even before becoming a talent agent, Weissman took pride in helping young performers get their start, and took credit for helping to launch the careers of Belle Baker, Molly Picon, and Paul Muni.

Weissman's sister, Bessie Bain, was also a performer in the Yiddish theater and on Broadway.

Weissman died in New York City on May 21, 1974.

Scope and Content Note

The Dora Weissman papers document Weissman's acting career; her work as a talent agent and as an acting coach; her relationships with friends, family, and colleagues; and her activities in the Jewish theatrical community. The collection contains photographs, scripts, correspondence, event programs, theater programs, scrapbooks, clippings, articles, periodicals, business records, and Weissman's notes. The collection dates from the 1880s to 1973, with the bulk of the materials dating from the 1930s to the 1960s. Materials are chiefly in English but also in Yiddish. The collection holds scripts by Weissman's father, Yiddish playwright and translator Reuben Weissman, dating between the 1880s and 1912.

Materials documenting Weissman's acting career consist of photographs, theater programs, scrapbooks, clippings, correspondence, contracts, résumés, and short biographical articles. Publicity

photographs of Weissman and other Yiddish actors, including group shots of performers on stage, are present. Two printing plates depicting Weissman are here. Most of the images date to the 1920s or 1930s; the earliest is a signed photograph of Bertha Kalich from 1906. Clippings and programs in Yiddish and English document Weissman's career from the 1930s to the 1960s. A small number of magazines and other materials from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) are present.

Weissman's charitable and social activities in the Jewish theatrical community are documented through event programs, souvenir booklets, and correspondence. Her work with the Ladies' Welfare League of the Yiddish Theatrical Alliance from 1939 to 1943 is best-represented; however, there is not a large amount of material related to any one organization.

Weissman's personal records consist of notebooks, appointment books, photographs of family and friends, correspondence, short scripts, speeches, stories, and memorabilia. Correspondence comprises letters, telegrams, and greeting cards to and from friends, family, clients, colleagues, and organizations. Many of Weissman's correspondents were active in the Jewish theater. Family photographs include portraits of Anshel Schorr and Bessie Bain. Weissman's handwritten notes, in English and Yiddish, appear in appointment books and notebooks, where she drafted or copied out scripts and story ideas, correspondence, articles, and prayers. Her notes also appear on materials throughout the collection.

Full-length scripts are for television, radio, and theater. The collection also holds a script for the 1953 film *The Guerilla Girl*. Some scripts have annotations and revisions. The bulk of the television scripts are Goldbergs scripts from 1949 to 1955; these scripts have numerous handwritten changes and additions by Weissman. Other television scripts include comedy shows and episodes of anthology programs, such as "Holiday Song," a 1953 episode of *Philco Television Playhouse* written by Paddy Chayefsky; "Finkle's Comet," a 1956 episode of *The Alcoa Hour*; and "Night Cry," a 1958 episode of *Kraft Mystery Theatre*. Radio scripts are from the 1940s and early 1950s. They include episodes of *The Story of Bess Johnson*, *Abie's Irish Rose*, *Young Dr. Malone*, *The Goldbergs*, *The House of Glass*, and the audition episode of *The Saga of Constance*, based on the life of Constance Bennett. Plays include works by Ben Hecht and Jules Michelson (Julius Michaelson). Several Yiddish theater scripts can be found in Reuben Weissman's records.

Reuben Weissman's records date between the 1880s and 1912. They consist of notebooks containing three handwritten scripts in Yiddish: an original play, and Weissman's translations of two plays, *The Great Person: Comedy in 4 Acts* and *Happiness: A Play in 3 Acts*. Also present is a notebook containing writing in Yiddish and Hebrew; the writing includes commentary on Jewish religion and history.

Talent agency materials date from the 1950s to 1968, and consist chiefly of actor photographs and résumés. Other materials related to Dora Weissman's work as an agent comprise agent lists, correspondence from clients and would-be clients, clippings, contracts, casting breakdowns, and form letters composed by Weissman, recommending her clients for roles. Some notes and correspondence relating to Weissman's clients can also be found scattered throughout her personal records.

The School of Theatre Arts materials consist mostly of scenes, sketches, monologues, and other short scripts for vocal and acting exercises or auditions. Student lists, print advertisements and advertising copy, and ledgers are also present. These records date from the 1940s to the 1960s. Many of Weissman's students were also her talent agency clients, and most of the theater school materials are intermixed with talent agency materials.

Arrangement: Materials are arranged in four categories: personal records documenting Weissman's acting career and private life; School of Theatre Arts and talent agency records, which are largely intermingled; TV, radio, and theater scripts; and Reuben Weissman's scripts and notes.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Photographs
Scripts

Subjects

Jewish actors
Theater, Yiddish -- New York (State) -- New York

Occupations

Talent scouts

Names

Shor, A. (Anshel), 1871-1942
Yiddish Theatrical Alliance (New York, N.Y.)

Container List

Personal Life and Acting Career

- b. 1 1914-1970, undated
Includes biographical information and theater programs.
- b. 8 f. 1-6 1920s-1960s
Includes scrapbooks.
- b. 3 1920s-1972
- b. 4 1925-1972
Includes Yiddish Theatrical Alliance materials.
- b. 5 1930-1973
- b. 33 1933-1942
Scrapbook and World War II programs: HIAS and Fight for Freedom Committee to Defend America.
- b. 2 1933-1972
- b. 7 1940s-1960s, undated
Includes notebooks.
- b. 6 1947-1973
Includes appointment books.

Photographs

- b. 8 f. 7-15 1906-1960s
- b. 34 1910s-1930s
- b. 35 1910s-1937
- b. 36 Printing Plates undated

School of Theatre Arts and Talent Agency

- b. 13 1939-1960s
- b. 9 1940s-1960s
- b. 11 1940s-1960s
- b. 12 1940s-1960s
- b. 10 1940s-1968

Actor Photographs and Resumes

- b. 14 1950s-1960s
- b. 15 1950s-1960s
- b. 16 1950s-1960s
- b. 17 1950s-1960s
- b. 18 1950s-1960s
- b. 19 1950s-1960s
- b. 20 1950s-1960s
- b. 21 1950s-1960s

Scripts

The Goldbergs

- b. 23 1949-1955
- b. 24 1950s

Scripts (cont.)

The Goldbergs (cont.)

- b. 25 f. 1-11 1950s
- b. 22 1953-1955
- b. 30 f. 3 The Guerilla Girl 1953
- The House of Glass
- b. 25 f. 12-13 1953-1954
- b. 26 f. 1-4 1953-1954
- Television and Radio
- b. 27 1938-1957
- b. 29 1940-1958, undated
- b. 26 f. 5-10 1947-1961
- b. 30 f. 1-2 1953, 1956
- b. 28 1956, 1958, undated
- Theater
- b. 32 f. 1-6 1917-1946, undated
- b. 30 f. 4-10 1946-1960
- b. 31 1946-1960s, undated
- b. 32 f. 7-10 Reuben Weissman Scripts and Notes 1880s-1912