

Inventory of the Roman Bohnen Papers, 1918-1976

*T-Mss 1994-028

Billy Rose Theatre Division



The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
New York, New York

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Roman Bohnen Papers, 1918-1976.

Collection ID: *T-Mss 1994-028

Creator: Roman Bohnen .

Extent: 2 lin. ft. (8 boxes)

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

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open to the public. Photocopying prohibited.

Preferred Citation: Roman Bohnen Papers, *T-Mss 1994-028, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Processing Information: The collection arrived in poor condition. Many of the letters were water damaged or extremely moldy. For the purpose of preservation, the moldy letters were photocopied onto acid free paper.

Biographical Note

Actor Roman Bohnen, known as "Bud" to family, friends and colleagues, was born November 24, 1901 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His parents were Lottie Johnston and artist Carl Bohnen. He had two siblings, his older brother Arthur and younger sister Charlotte. Bohnen was educated in Munich, Germany, where his family lived from 1914-1917, and at the University of Minnesota where he was active in his fraternity, involved in drama club productions, and was such an outstanding cheerleader he earned the title "Rooter King". After working in stock for a couple of years, he joined Thomas Wood Stevens' newly formed repertory company at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago where he remained for five years playing over one thousand performances. He also taught make-up classes and created the First-Night Club, an audience subscription promotion.

In 1930 Bohnen headed for New York and married actress Hildur Ouse, whom he had met at the Goodman. He landed his first Broadway role in *As Husbands Go* by Rachel Crothers in 1931. In 1932, after working with the Group Theatre during their summer season in Dover Furnace, N. Y., he was chosen to replace Franchot Tone in the Group's production of *Success Story*. Bohnen joined the Group on a full-time basis in 1934 playing roles in *Waiting for Lefty*, *Golden Boy*, *Awake and Sing*, and *The Gentle People*,

to name only a few. He was also a member of the Group's Actors' Council. Besides acting, Bohnen wrote plays. *Incubator*, which he co-wrote with John Lyman, was produced in 1932. His one-act *\$4.80 Top*, later slightly revised under the title *Four Forty*, was produced at the Actor's Lab in the 1940's.

In 1937 Walter Wanger attempted to put together a motion picture deal with the Group which would form a resident company for movie production. His plans fell through but the possibility of film work brought Bohnen to Hollywood where he carved out a career as a character actor appearing in over thirty films including *Of Mice and Men*, *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *Edge of Darkness*. While in Hollywood, Bohnen helped found and was the driving force behind the Actors' Laboratory Theatre. He was performing in the Lab production of *A Distant Isle* when he collapsed and died on February 24, 1949. His wife, Hildur, had died in 1941. They left behind one daughter, Marina, who was affectionately known as Button.

Scope and Content Note

The Roman Bohnen papers are primarily made up of family, personal, and professional correspondence and scrapbooks of clippings, reviews, programs, and photographs. The collection documents Bohnen's career including early theatrical experiences, his life as a New York actor and member of the Group Theatre, his motion picture years, and the establishment of The Actors' Lab. The correspondence between him and his brother Arthur is rich in personal information about family relationships. A small but touching amount of ephemera exists as well as Bohnen's notes for meetings, productions, and articles and an original copy of *Incubator*. The papers span the years 1919-1976 with the emphasis on 1922-1949. Arthur Bohnen's account of his brother's life is included.

Organization

- Series I. Family Correspondence
- Series II. Personal and Professional Correspondence
- Series III. Writings
- Series IV. Biographical Materials
- Series V. Ephemera
- Series VI. Scrapbooks

Series Descriptions and Container Listing

Series I. Family Correspondence, 1921-1976

2 boxes

Chronological

The bulk of the material in this series is between Bohnen and his brother Arthur. They remained close throughout their lives. Their letters, arranged chronologically, are filled with warmth, regard, and humor and chronicle family events, the peripatetic life of an actor, and Bohnen's creative thinking. Other family correspondence includes letters to and from his parents and his sister and one folder of letters from Hildur to various family members. Three folders are devoted to the aftermath of Bohnen's death and putting his affairs in order. The information regarding the custody hearing for his daughter includes two letters from Ruth Nelson. Copies of letters Arthur wrote to a few of Bud's colleagues hoping for information for a biography he was preparing are also included.

- | | | |
|------|------|--|
| b. 1 | f. 1 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1922-1923
1 folder [17 letters, 44 items].
Correspondence from Roman Bohnen to his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 2 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1924
1 folder [5 letters, 7 items].
Correspondence from Roman Bohnen to his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 3 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1925
1 folder [3 letters, 6 items].
Correspondence from Roman Bohnen to his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 4 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1927
1 folder [6 letters, 7 items].
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 5 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1928
1 folder [6 letters, 7 items].
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 6 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1929
1 folder [6 letters, 8 items].
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from his brother Arthur. |
| b. 1 | f. 7 | Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1930
1 folder [18 letters, 36 items].
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur. |

- b. 1 f. 8 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1931**
1 folder [40 letters, 54 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 9 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1932**
1 folder [33 letters, 42 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 10 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1933**
1 folder [36 letters, 70 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 11 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1934**
1 folder [24 letters, 45 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 12 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1935**
1 folder [19 letters, 21 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 13 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1936**
1 folder [52 letters, 63 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 14 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1937**
1 folder [15 letters, 32 items].
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 15 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1938**
1 folder [23 letters, 27 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 16 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1939**
1 folder [10 letters, 11 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 17 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1940**
1 folder [11 letters, 20 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 18 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1941**
1 folder [7 letters, 16 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman Bohnen.
- b. 1 f. 19 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1942**
1 folder [1 letter, 2 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman

Bohnen.

- b. 1 f. 20 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1943**
1 folder [4 letters, 5 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman Bohnen.
- b. 1 f. 21 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1944**
1 folder [8 letters, 11 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 22 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1945**
1 folder [3 letters, 6 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman Bohnen.
- b. 1 f. 23 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1946**
1 folder [2 letters, 2 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman Bohnen.
- b. 1 f. 24 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1947**
1 folder [3 letters, 6 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 25 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1948**
1 folder [14 letters, 28 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 26 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1949**
1 folder [2 letters, 2 items]
Correspondence to Arthur Bohnen from his brother Roman Bohnen.
- b. 1 f. 27 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen**
1 folder [11 letters, 12 items]
Undated correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his brother Arthur.
- b. 1 f. 28 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1923-1949**
1 folder [18 letters, 32 items]
Correspondence between Arthur Bohnen and other members of the Bohnen family and friends.
- b. 2 f. 1 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1949**
1 folder
Correspondence and Arthur Bohnen's notes regarding the death of his brother Roman Bohnen.

- b. 2 f. 2 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1949**
1 folder
Correspondence and Arthur Bohnen's notes regarding the death of his brother Roman Bohnen. Papers documenting the legal battle over the guardianship of Roman's daughter Marina (a.k.a. Button) and three letters from Ruth Nelson are also included.
- b. 2 f. 3 **Correspondence / Arthur Bohnen, 1972-1973**
1 folder [5 letters, 9 items]
Correspondence between Arthur Bohnen and several colleagues of his brother Roman Bohnen concerning gathering material for a biography of Roman.
- b. 2 f. 4 **Correspondence / Carl Bohnen, 1921-1935**
1 folder [30 letters, 41 items]
Correspondence from Roman Bohnen to his parents Carl and Lottie Bohnen.
- b. 2 f. 5 **Correspondence / Carl Bohnen, 1937-1948**
1 folder [18 letters, 48 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his parents Carl and Lottie Bohnen.
- b. 2 f. 6 **Correspondence / Hildur Ouse Bohnen, 1932-1939**
1 folder [8 letters, 9 items]
Correspondence from Hildur Ouse Bohnen [stage name: Lanmark] to family members and friends.
- b. 2 f. 7 **Correspondence / Charlotte Bohnen, 1937-1949**
1 folder [15 letters, 33 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his sister Charlotte. Also included are copies of the NY Public Library requests (with Charlotte's notes to Arthur) for the possible donation of Roman's papers.

Series II. Personal and Professional Correspondence, 1918-1949

12 folders

Alphabetical

This series is arranged alphabetically and includes letters from friends, colleagues, and distant family. Among well-known correspondents are: Walter Fried (2), Whitford Kane (3), Elia Kazan (1), Sanford Meisner (1), Arthur Miller (1), Lewis Milestone (1), Ruth Nelson (1), and Harry Truman (1). A few folders are arranged by production and may include notes, correspondence, opening night telegrams, or contracts. Most of the letters in this series exist only in photocopy as the originals were

badly damaged.

- b. 3 f. 1 **Correspondence "A-B", 1931-1949**
1 folder [26 letters, 36 items]
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from friends and colleagues whose names begin with "A-B". A few Bohnen responses included.
- b. 3 f. 2 **Correspondence "C-G", 1928-1949**
1 folder [27 letters, 35 items]
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from friends and colleagues whose names begin with "C-G". Two letters from Walter Fried and one letter to Cheryl Crawford are included.
- b. 3 f. 3 **Correspondence "H-N", 1928-1948**
1 folder [28 letters, 37 items]
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from friends and colleagues whose names begin with "H-N". Included are letters from Whitford Kane (3), Elia Kazan (1), Sanford Meisner (1), Arthur Miller (1), Lewis Milestone (1), and Ruth Nelson (1).
- b. 3 f. 4 **Correspondence "O-Q", 1941-1948**
1 folder [20 letters, 35 items]
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from friends and colleagues whose names begin with "O-Q". Included are several letters from Bohnen's mother-in-law.
- b. 3 f. 5 **Correspondence / Clifford Odets, 1941-1948**
1 folder [10 letters, 14 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and Clifford Odets.
- b. 3 f. 6 **Correspondence "R-T", 1927-1948**
1 folder [29 letters, 38 items]
Correspondence between Roman Bohnen and his friends and colleagues whose names begin with "R-T". Included are a copy of a letter from Harry Truman and a letter from Bohnen to John Steinbeck.
- b. 3 f. 7 **Correspondence "W-Z", 1933-1948**
1 folder [8 letters, 10 items]
Correspondence to Roman Bohnen from friends and colleagues whose names begin with "W-Z". Included is a letter from Margaret Webster.
- b. 3 f. 8 **Miscellaneous correspondence, 1918-1948**
1 folder [21 letters, 27 items]
Miscellaneous and unidentified correspondence between Roman

Bohnen and his friends and colleagues.

- b. 3 f. 9 *As husbands go* / Rachel Crothers, 1931-1932
1 folder
Opening night telegrams [1931 and 1932] to Roman Bohnen and correspondence regarding the Alpha Tau Omega theater party [1932].
- b. 3 f. 10 *\$4.80 top* / Roman Bohnen, 1948
1 folder
Correspondence regarding the play *\$4.80 Top* [a.k.a. *Four Forty*] by Roman Bohnen.
- b. 3 f. 11 *Gentle people* / Irwin Shaw, 1939
1 folder
Opening night telegrams to Roman Bohnen and one page of handwritten quotes from reviews.
- b. 3 f. 12 *Golden boy* / Clifford Odets, 1937-1938
1 folder
Opening night telegrams and letters to Roman Bohnen. Bohnen's contracts included.

Series III. Writings, 1931-1941
5 folders

Alphabetical

This series includes an original typescript of *Incubator* with a note from Bohnen to his brother attached to the title page and two rough pencil sketches of set floor plans; a folder of notes and other items pertaining to the Group Theatre; a notebook which appears to be thoughts on an Actors' Lab production of *Paradise Lost* and another which may be notes for the Group production of *The Gentle People*; Bohnen's poems and skits and a piece from his play *Gala Moment*. Actors' Lab notes include rough drafts of articles by Bohnen and a press statement about the Tenney hearings.

- b. 3 f. 13 *Incubator* / John Lyman, 1931
1 folder
Typescript, with two pages of rough set plans, of the play *Incubator* by John Lyman and Roman Bohnen. A note from Bohnen to his brother Arthur is attached to the title page.
- b. 3 f. 14 Group Theatre notes / Roman Bohnen, 1931-1941
1 folder
Roman Bohnen's notes regarding The Group Theatre. Includes a

paper by Harold Clurman entitled Plans for a First Studio and a letter to Cheryl Crawford from *Theatre Arts Monthly*. [1931, 1941 and n.d.]

- b. 3 f. 15 **Actors' Laboratory notes / Roman Bohnen**
1 folder
Notes and articles by Roman Bohnen include *The Potential of the Actors' Lab*, a press statement about the Tenney hearings, Bohnen's thoughts on Harold Clurman's *The Fervent Years*, and an Actors' Lab flyer.
- b. 3 f. 16 **Notebooks / Roman Bohnen.**
1 folder [2 notebooks].
Roman Bohnen's rehearsal notebooks for an Actors' Lab production of *Paradise Lost* and the Group Theatre production of *The Gentle People*.
- b. 3 f. 17 **Miscellaneous writings / Roman Bohnen**
1 folder
Poems and skits by Roman Bohnen. Working draft of a scene from *Gala Moment*.

Series IV. Biographical Materials, 1976

1 folder

Arthur Bohnen began a biography of Roman in 1976 and included photocopies of pertinent letters, poems, and articles. This biographical account is a complete source of events and dates.

- b. 3 f. 18 **Roman Bohnen biography / Arthur Bohnen, 1976.**
1 folder.
Manuscript of a biography of Roman Bohnen by his brother Arthur. Includes lists of Bohnen's films with notes by his sister Charlotte.

Series V. Ephemera

1 folder

Among the items in this series are a note to Clifford Odets from Marina Bohnen (he was her godfather), family Christmas poems, Goodman Theatre First-Night Club receipts, programs from high school and college productions, and unidentified notes.

- b. 3 f. 19 **Ephemera / Roman Bohnen.**
1 folder.
Includes programs (The Garrick Club and The Central High School Dramatic Club of Saint Paul), Goodman Theater First-

Night Club receipts, family Christmas poems, letters from Button (Bohnen's daughter) to family members and Clifford Odets, and several pages of unidentified notes.

Series VI. Scrapbooks, 1919-1949.

5 boxes

Chronological

There are five scrapbooks in this series. The first one was entirely made up of photographs and was disassembled for preservation purposes. The movie stills were taken out of the collection and added to the Theatre Collection Photo Files (see attached sheet). The remaining scrapbooks are intact and document, through clippings and programs, Bohnen's entire career from high school productions to his years in Hollywood.

- | | | |
|------|------|---|
| b. 4 | f. 1 | Unidentified drawing
1 folder
Crayon drawing found in a Roman Bohnen scrapbook. [Artist unknown]. |
| b. 4 | f. 2 | Photographs / Roman Bohnen.
1 folder.
Miscellaneous headshots and character portraits of Roman Bohnen. Also includes unidentified play and film photographs. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook] |
| b. 4 | f. 3 | Photographs / Roman Bohnen, 1919-1923.
1 folder.
Photographs from high school and the University of Minnesota productions in which Roman Bohnen participated. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook] |
| b. 4 | f. 4 | Photographs / Kenneth Sawyer Goodman Memorial Theatre (Chicago, Illinois), 1925-1930.
1 folder.
Photographs of Roman Bohnen and productions he appeared in at the Goodman Theatre. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]. |
| b. 4 | f. 5 | Photographs / Kenneth Sawyer Goodman Memorial Theatre (Chicago, Illinois), 1925-1930
1 folder.
Photographs of Roman Bohnen's fellow actors at the Goodman Theatre. Includes autographed photographs of Whitford Kane, Harold M. Murray and Eddie Reed. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook] |

- b. 4 f. 6 **Photographs / Garden Theater (St. Louis, Mo.), 1927**
1 folder
Photographs of Roman Bohnen and his fellow actors at the Garden Theater in St. Louis. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 7 ***Awake and sing* / Clifford Odets, 1935.**
1 folder.
Rehearsal photograph from The Group Theatre production of the play *Awake and Sing* by Clifford Odets. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 8 ***Waiting for Lefty* / Clifford Odets, 1935.**
1 folder.
Photograph of a newspaper clipping for The Group Theatre production of the play *Waiting For Lefty* by Clifford Odets. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 9 ***Case of Clyde Griffiths* / Erwin Piscator, 1936.**
1 folder.
Photographs from The Group Theatre production of the play *Case of Clyde Griffiths* by Erwin Piscator and Lena Goldschmidt. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 10 ***Johnny Johnson (Musical)* / Kurt Weill, 1936.**
1 folder.
Photographs from The Group Theatre production of the musical *Johnny Johnson*: music by Kurt Weill, book by Paul Green. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 11 ***Men in white* / Sidney Kingsley, 1935.**
1 folder.
Photograph from The Group Theatre production of *Men in White* by Sidney Kingsley. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 12 ***Golden boy* / Clifford Odets, 1937-1938**
1 folder.
Photographs of The Group Theatre production of the play *Golden Boy* by Clifford Odets [1937]. Includes photos outside the theater in London [1938]. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 13 ***Gentle people* / Irwin Shaw, 1939**
1 folder
Photographs from The Group Theatre production of the play *The Gentle People* by Irwin Shaw. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 14 ***Thunder Rock* / Robert Ardrey, 1939**

- 1 folder
Photographs from The Group Theatre production of the play *Thunder Rock* by Robert Ardrey. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 15 *Five alarm waltz* / Lucille S. (Smith) Prumbs, 1941
1 folder
Production photograph from the play *Five Alarm Waltz*. [Part of a Roman Bohnen scrapbook]
- b. 4 f. 16 *Of mice and men* (Motion picture : 1940).
1 folder.
Photographs (1 autographed) of Roman Bohnen as Candy in the motion picture *Of Mice and Men*. Also includes one informal photo of cast members and Bohnen's artist father Carl Bohnen.
- b. 5 **Scrapbook / Roman Bohnen, 1919-1949.**
1 scrapbook.
Scrapbook [1919-1940, 1949] of clippings, programs, telegrams, drawings, and obituaries documenting the career of Roman Bohnen. Although this scrapbook is mainly about Goodman Theatre productions, it also includes information about high school and college productions, the Garden Theater, the Rockford Players, and the Cape Playhouse.
- b. 6 **Scrapbook / Roman Bohnen, 1921-1938.**
1 scrapbook.
Scrapbook of clippings and programs documenting the career of Roman Bohnen. Includes information about Group Theatre productions, *Incubator* by John Lyman and Roman Bohnen, and *As Husbands Go* by Rachel Crothers.
- b. 7 **Scrapbook / Roman Bohnen, 1938-1949.**
1 scrapbook.
Scrapbook of clippings and programs documenting the career of Roman Bohnen. Includes information about Bohnen's film career, Group Theatre productions, the Actors' Lab, and obituaries.
- b. 8 **Scrapbook / Roman Bohnen, 1924-1949.**
1 box.
Scrapbook of clippings about the career of Roman Bohnen.

Separated Materials

Copies of *\$4.80 Top* and the slightly revised version entitled *Four Forty* may be found in the Theatre Collection scripts files.