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Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

George Furth papers

1932-2008

*T-Mss 2001-005

Compiled by Diana Bertolini.

Summary

Creator: Furth, George, 1932-2008

Title: George Furth papers

Date: 1932-2008

Size: 23.17 linear feet (58 boxes); 384 Kilobytes (3 computer files)

Source: Donated by George Furth between 2001 and 2008.

Abstract: George Furth (1932-2008) was an American playwright, librettist and actor, most famous for writing the books for two Stephen Sondheim musicals, *Company* and *Merrily We Roll Along*. The George Furth papers contain professional and personal papers, created or collected by Furth as a playwright and actor.

Conditions Governing Access:

Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Conditions Governing Use: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

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Processing note: Compiled by Diana Bertolini. Compiled by Diana Bertolini.

Creator History

George Furth was born George Schweinfurth in Chicago, Illinois on December 14, 1932. He received a Bachelor of Science in Speech from Northwestern University in 1954 and a master's degree from Columbia University. After completing his education, he served in the Navy until being honorably discharged in 1962.

Furth began his theatrical career as an actor, making his Broadway debut in the 1961 comedy, *A Cook for Mr. General*. In 1963, he appeared in the revue *Hot Spot*, which starred Judy Holliday. The score by Mary Rodgers contained a few uncredited contributions from another young songwriter, her close friend Stephen Sondheim. Furth and Sondheim met and became friends during the run of *Hot Spot*.

For the rest of his life, Furth's acting career would be confined to television and film, making 90 appearances from the 1960s to the 1990s. Furth appeared in such films as *The Best Man* (1964), *The Boston Strangler* (1968), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Shampoo* (1975), *The Cannonball Run* (1981), and *Bulworth* (1998). Many of the films in which Furth appeared were projects involving his friend and Northwestern classmate, Warren Beatty. His more numerous television appearances include such shows as *The Defenders*; *Broadside*; *Tammy*; *Rod Serling's Night Gallery*; *The Odd Couple*; *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*; *Murphy Brown*; *L.A. Law*; *Murder, She Wrote*; and *The Nanny*.

In the late 1960s, Furth took up writing on the advice of his psychoanalyst. He ended up writing a series of one act plays which investigated all aspects of marriage. Unable to get financial backing for a production, which would feature the revered actress Kim Stanley as all the wives in the vignettes, Furth showed the script to director and producer Harold Prince, who suggested turning it into a musical. With the insertion of a new central character, a single man who was a friend to all the married couples, a reduction of the number of couples from eleven to five, and the writing of a musical score by Stephen Sondheim, the show became *Company*. *Company* opened in 1970 and went on to win 6 Tony Awards, including Best Book of a Musical for Furth and Best Musical.

Furth followed up *Company* with a collection of four one-acts called *Twigs*, which opened on Broadway in 1971. Some of the plays used in *Twigs* had been written for the project which eventually became *Company*. He also provided the book for Kander and Ebb's musical, *The Act* (1977), which starred Liza Minnelli; and had another play produced on Broadway, *The Supporting Cast* (1981). That same year, another Furth show opened on Broadway, his second collaboration with Sondheim, *Merrily We Roll Along*, an update and musical of George S. Kauffman and Moss Hart's 1934 play. Though a commercial failure in its original Broadway run, *Merrily We Roll Along's* original cast recording has earned the show cult status. Sondheim and Furth revised the show for subsequent regional productions.

Furth's next play, *Precious Sons*, had a brief Broadway run in 1986. In 1996, he reunited with Sondheim for a non-musical collaboration, the mystery play, *Getting Away with Murder*. During the early 1990s Furth wrote the book and lyrics for a one woman musical called *Off the Record*, a collaboration with composer Doug Katsaros. The show was never done in New York, but was produced regionally as both *Off the Record* and *Music Minus One*, starring Judith Ivey, Andrea McArdle, Sally Mays, and Leslie Uggams.

George Furth was a member of the Actors Studio and the Dramatist's Guild. Furth's companion, Demmy Tambakos, died in 1996. George Furth died of a lung infection on August 11, 2008, in Santa Monica, California.

Scope and Content Note

The George Furth papers contain professional and personal papers, created or collected by Furth as a playwright and actor. This collection contains the following four groups: Correspondence, Production Materials, Personal Materials, and Appointment Books.

George Furth's correspondence provides a comprehensive look at his personal life and career from 1980 to 2008. Though there are a number of letters from 1956 to 1973, this period is not covered in as much detail as the last three decades of his life. Furth's incoming and outgoing letters from 1980 to his death in 2008 paint a very clear picture of his struggles to write, cast, and get his new works produced, as well as to revise older works. Furth's opinions on revivals of his plays, the process of seeking funding and actors for productions of new plays, firing actors, collaboration, revision, and critical responses to shows are revealed in his extensive correspondence. Furth's choice to give up acting full-time to be a writer is also a frequent topic in his letters. Of particular interest are notes Furth wrote for the directors of revivals of his shows, illuminating characters' subtexts and his intended meanings of lines and scenes.

Highly personal topics such as Furth's relationship with longtime companion Demmy Tambakos, Tambakos' death in 1996, and Furth's endowment of the Tambakos Film Collection and Film Series at Merrimack College after his death are covered here. Furth and his correspondents also discuss therapy/psychoanalysis, writing as therapy, alcoholism, the Alcoholic Anonymous program, his coming out process, and religion. Other more general topics these letters touch on include living in New York versus Los Angeles, vacations, house guests, properties, the moral value of charities, gay bashing, gays in the military, and gay rights.

Correspondents include family members and friends and colleagues, such as Gerard Allesandrini, Alan Arkin, Dennis Aspland, Warren Beatty, Annette Bening, Ellen Burstyn, Julie Christie, Judy Collins, Dominick Dunne, Fred Ebb, Larry Gelbart, Michael Grandage, Gary Griffin, Judith Ivey, John Kander, Doug Katsaros, Robert Lanz, Cloris Leachman, Cameron Mackintosh, Steve Martin, Clinton Mayer, Edward McGee, Robert Morse, Pamela Myers, Arthur Penn, Anthony Perkins, Hal Prince, Suzi Quatro, Lee Remick, Debbie Reynolds, Nancy Sinatra, Stephen Sondheim, Sissy Spacek, Elaine Stritch, Demmy Tambakos, and Mary Walsh.

Furth's personal and professional lives were so intertwined that anyone interested in his opinions and thoughts regarding specific productions is advised to consult the correspondence for the years that correspond with that production. In most of Furth's letters, he is preoccupied with whatever productions he was working on at that time. Correspondence occasionally includes clippings and other papers created or collected concurrently with the correspondence.

Production materials from plays, films, and musicals written by Furth consist of documents created or collected by George Furth while writing the plays *Getting Away with Murder*, *NY/LA*, *Precious Sons*, *The Supporting Cast*, *Twigs* and the books to the musicals *The Act*, *Company*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, and *Off the Record*. Furth's creative process is well documented with multiple script drafts for each play, with annotations, changes, revisions, and correspondence between Furth and his collaborators, directors and producers regarding the revision process and production choices. The coverage of revisions is particularly plentiful in Furth's case because he revised many of his shows after their initial productions, and often advised directors, actors, and producers staging revivals.

The 1977 musical on which Furth collaborated with composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb is well documented in this collection under its pre-Broadway titles, *In Person and Shine It On!*; under its Broadway title, *The Act*; and under the title Furth used when he tried to revive it, *The Comeback*. There are multiple scripts for all these versions, with changes and notes, as well as programs, clippings, and photographs from the Broadway production, which starred Liza Minnelli. Furth's chronological correspondence from the 1980s and 1990s contains letters between Furth and actresses such as Debbie Reynolds and Goldie Hawn, about the possibility of performing *The Comeback* in a limited engagement in Las Vegas or Los Angeles. There are also copies of Furth's deposition in a lawsuit surrounding *The Act*. Director Stanley Donen sued Furth because he believed introducing Furth to *The*

Act star Liza Minnelli warranted a share of the show's profits.

Furth's early versions of *Company* are present under the titles *My Married Friends*; and *A Husband, A Wife, A Friend*. The latter includes the Furth one-acts, *Harry and Sarah*, *Bertha and Art*, *Peter and Georgia*, *Ma and Pa*, *Cynthia and William*, *Lorraine and Allen*, *Jenny and David*, and *Dorothy and Lou*. Only three of these plays were used in any form in the final show, though others were used in Furth's 1971 play, *Twigs*. Also of particular interest to researchers will be the extensive notes Furth took of his meetings with director Harold Prince and composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim. The entire evolution of the piece is detailed through these notes, letters, and drafts. There are also clippings, scripts, photographs, correspondence, and programs from the original Broadway production, national tour, and subsequent regional productions and Broadway revivals.

Getting Away with Murder, the mystery play Furth wrote with Sondheim, is documented extensively, from the background research and notes on the *Seven Deadly Sins* (a theme explored in the play), dating back to 1988, to the many drafts of the script. Some of the pre-Broadway drafts (including first draft and treatment) from 1994 and 1995 use the titles *The Doctor is Out* and *Sins*. Furth's process of writing, revision, and collaboration with Sondheim is documented with extensive notes, and revisions from the first draft to the 1995 production at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, to the 1996 Broadway production. After the show closed Paramount that optioned the project for a film adaptation which was never made. Furth's chronological correspondence from the 1990s includes many letters between Sondheim and Furth discussing the film adaptation and the many treatments and drafts they submitted to Paramount.

Materials created and collected by Furth as the book-writer of the musical *Merrily We Roll Along* include programs, clippings, notes, photographs, and scripts. Furth's process of writing and revising the show for its original Broadway run is revealed through multiple drafts, from Furth's October 1980 first draft, with only a few songs from the Sondheim score, to the final version that opened on Broadway in November of 1981. The particular place the show held for many people involved is revealed in the many opening night telegrams, notes and letters Furth exchanged with friends, collaborators and members of the company. Included here are research materials Furth collected on the Kaufman and Hart play the musical was based on, including copies of the reviews and a program from the 1934 original Broadway production.

There are drafts from the many different revisions of the script Furth and Sondheim collaborated on for regional productions of the show at the La Jolla Playhouse in California and Arena Stage in Washington D.C., as well as the 1998 licensed script. The revisions of *Merrily We Roll Along* are discussed frequently in Furth's 1980s and 1990s correspondence with Sondheim, with the directors and producers of revivals, and with other friends. In these letters, Furth provides valuable analysis of the failure of the original production as well as justification for many of the changes he and Sondheim made for subsequent versions.

There is one floppy disk containing three computer files relating to the licensed script for *Merrily We Roll Along*. These files include a version of the script from July 17, 1995 and notes from Music Theatre International's John Lowell, accompanying the script, dated August 14, 1995. Electronic records are currently unavailable.

Furth's 1986 play *Precious Sons* is documented with multiple scripts drafts, photographs, programs, notes on revisions, correspondence, and a sketch of the original cast, an opening night gift to Furth by star Judith Ivey. Furth's 1981 play, *The Supporting Cast*, is covered here with scripts, notes, and programs. Also present are scripts for unproduced projects, such as the play, *NY/LA*, and the screenplay titled *One Night Stand or Joy*. Furth's musical, *One Night Stand or Music Minus One*, is

represented here with scripts, correspondence with collaborator Doug Katsaros, and with programs, photographs, and clippings from the various regional productions of the piece.

Materials created or collected by Furth through the process of writing the play *Twigs* consist of programs, letters, clippings, reviews, and scripts. There are early drafts, under the original title, *A Chorus Line*. One of these includes a note from Furth that Michael Bennett, the director of *Twigs*, threw that title out, and of course, he used it famously for a musical he directed four years later. *Twigs* consists of five one-act plays, four of which were originally part of the project that later became *Company*. Researchers interested in *Twigs* should also see the early scripts of *Company* for the first drafts of these one act plays.

Scripts for theatre, film, and television projects Furth acted in document his career as an actor from 1963 to 1996. Some of these scripts are early drafts with different titles. Of particular interest are Furth's annotations on the history of his involvement with the project or describing notes he was given by the authors or directors. This collection includes scripts for *Airport 1977*; *The Best Man*; *Blazing Saddles*; *The Boston Strangler*; *A Cook for Mister General*; *The Cool Ones*; *Criss Cross*; *Dr. Detroit*; *Games*; *Goodbye, Lover*; *How to Save a Marriage and Ruin Your Life*; *The Man with Two Brains*; *Mega Force*; *Myra Breckinridge*; *The New Interns*; *Nobody's Perfect*; *Norman...Is That You?*; *Oh, God*; *Prime Time*; *A Rage to Live*; *The Seven Ages of Man: Infancy*; *A Very Special Favor*; and *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?* There are also photographs from *Broadside*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Dr. Detroit*, *Laredo*, *Myra Breckinridge*, *Run for Your Life*, *Tammy*, and *Young Doctors in Love*.

Other items created or collected by Furth the actor include programs, clippings, and photographs from *Hot Spot*, *A Cook for Mr. General*, *Tiny Alice*, *The Little Revue* and other plays, revues, and nightclub acts he performed in while a student at Northwestern and during his early years in New York.

Furth's personal life, career in general, childhood, and youth are documented with items such as programs, photographs, awards, clippings, schoolwork, personal writings, and awards. Of particular value are two diaries Furth wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, which reveal his thoughts and feelings on his personal life and career during a period of his life that is not covered extensively in his correspondence. Furth's appointment book provide biographical information regarding his day to day activities and the friends he saw from 1958 to 2005. In Furth's appointment books he frequently made notes of things to do, people to call, as well as scheduling social events and professional meetings and rehearsals.

This collection also includes audio recordings. There are audio tapes of live performances of Furth's plays and musicals, *Company*, *Getting Away with Murder*, and *The Supporting Cast*. Also included are reel to reel tapes of the improvisational performances Furth acted in, along with Gene Hackman, Cynthia Harris, and Gary Goodrow, under the direction of George Morrison, at *The Premise*. Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Arrangement: This collection is arranged in the following four groups: Correspondence, Production Materials, Personal Materials, and Appointment Books.

Key Terms

Occupations

Actors
Dramatists
Librettists
Playwrights

Writers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Clippings
Correspondence
Photographs
Programs
Scrapbooks
Scripts

Subjects

Motion pictures -- Production and direction
Musicals
Musicals -- Librettos
Musicals -- Production and direction
Musicals -- Writing and publishing
Television acting

Names

Ebb, Fred
Kander, John
Katsaros, Doug
Sondheim, Stephen

Container List

Correspondence 1956-2008

b. 1 f. 1-4	1956-1984
b. 2 f. 1-4	1982-1990
b. 3 f. 1-5	1989-1990
b. 4 f. 1-4	1990-1994
b. 5 f. 1-4	1993-1994
b. 6 f. 1-5	1994-1995
b. 7 f. 1-4	1995-1996
b. 8 f. 1-4	1996
b. 9 f. 1-4	1996
b. 10 f. 1-3	1998
b. 11 f. 1-5	1999-2000
b. 12 f. 1-4	2000-2004
b. 13 f. 1-4	2002-2006
b. 14 f. 1-3	2004-2008

Production Materials 1934-2006

Plays, Films and Musicals Written by Furth 1934-2006

The Act 1974-1979

Book by George Furth, Music by John Kander, Lyrics by Fred Ebb

b. 14 f. 4-5	1974-1975
b. 15 f. 1-6	1975-1979
b. 16 f. 1-3	1979, undated
b. 52 f. 1	Scrapbook 1977

Company 1968-2006

Book by George Furth, Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

b. 16 f. 4-7	1968-1970
b. 17 f. 1-4	1969-1995
b. 18 f. 1-5	1969-1970
b. 19 f. 1-7	1970-2006
b. 53 f. 1-2	Scrapbooks 1970
b. 54 f. 1-3	Scrapbooks and Program 1970-1971, undated
b. 55 f. 1	Scrapbook 1970-1974

Getting Away with Murder 1988-1995

Play by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth

b. 20 f. 1-4	1988-1994
b. 21 f. 1-4	1990-1995
b. 22 f. 1-6	1994-1995
b. 23 f. 1-6	1995

Merrily We Roll Along 1934-2000

Book by George Furth, Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Production Materials (cont.)

Plays, Films and Musicals Written by Furth (cont.)

Merrily We Roll Along (cont.)

- b. 24 f. 1-6 1934-2000
- b. 25 f. 1-5 1981-1985
- b. 26 f. 1-5 1985-1988
- b. 27 f. 1-5 1989-1992
- b. 28 f. 1-5 1994-1995
- b. 29 f. 1-4 1997-2000
- b. 52 f. 2 Scrapbook 1981
- er. 0001 Published Script and Memos 1995
(384 kilobytes (3 computer files))
- NY/LA
- A play by George Furth
- b. 29 f. 5-7 Undated
- b. 30 f. 1 Undated
- b. 30 f. 2-4 *Off the Record/ Music Minus One* 1989-1995
Book and lyrics by George Furth, Music by Doug Katsaros
- b. 31 f. 1-2 *One Night Stand/ Joy* 1977, 1994
Screenplay by Joan Rivers and George Furth
- Precious Sons* 1983-1988
A play by George Furth
- b. 31 f. 3-6 1983-1986
- b. 32 f. 1-7 1986-1988
- b. 56 f. 1 Scrapbook 1986
- The Supporting Cast* 1980-1986
A play by George Furth
- b. 33 f. 1-5 1980-1986
- b. 57 f. 1 Scrapbook 1981-1986
- Twigs* 1970-1975
A play by George Furth
- b. 34 f. 1-6 1970-1973
- b. 35 f. 1-2 1971-1973
- b. 58 f. 1 Scrapbook 1971-1975

Film and Televisions Projects Featuring Furth as an Actor 1961-1996

- b. 35 f. 3-6 *Airport- The Boston Strangler* 1963-1977
- b. 36 f. 1-5 *Broadside- Criss Cross* 1961-1969
- b. 37 f. 1-7 *Dr. Detroit- Laredo* 1966-1996
- b. 38 f. 1-5 *The Man with Two Brains- Nobody's Perfect/The Little Bustard* 1963-1983
- b. 39 f. 1-5 *Norman...Is That You?- Run for Your Life* 1964-1976
- b. 40 f. 1-5 *Tammy- What's So Bad About Feeling Good?* 1964-1982

Youth and Personal Materials 1932-1990s

- b. 41 f. 1-5 1932-1990s
- b. 42 f. 1-5 1947-1980s
- b. 43 f. 1-8 1956-1987
- b. 58 f. 2 Photographs and Posters 1947-1990s

Appointment Books 1958-2005

b. 44 f. 1-5	1958-1966
b. 45 f. 1-5	1967-1975
b. 46 f. 1-5	1976-1980
b. 47 f. 1-5	1981-1985
b. 48 f. 1-4	1986-1989
b. 49 f. 1-4	1990-1995
b. 50 f. 1-4	1996-1999
b. 51 f. 1-4	2000-2005