



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Tharon Musser designs and papers

1945-2000

*T-Vim 2007-020

Compiled by Diana Bertolini, 2013

Summary

Creator: Musser, Tharon

Title: Tharon Musser designs and papers

Date: 1945-2000

Size: 37.5 linear feet (90 boxes, 1 tube); 143.36 kb (4 computer files)

Source: Donated by Marilyn Rennagel, as attorney-in-fact for Tharon Musser, in 2007.

Abstract: Tharon Musser was a prominent 20th-century American lighting designer, working on theatre, dance, opera, special events, and industrial shows. The Tharon Musser lighting designs and papers contain materials collected and created by Musser over the course of her career. The majority of this collection consists of lighting files that Musser designed for productions and companies. Other items include programs, posters, professional files, and personal files.

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Creator History

Tharon Myrene Musser was born as Kathleen Welland in Roanoke, Virginia, on January 8th, 1924. After the early death of her birth parents, she was adopted by George and Hazel Musser in 1929, and named Tharon. She graduated from Berea College in Kentucky in 1946, and earned a Master of Arts from Yale Drama School in 1950, where she studied technical design and lighting. Musser took a break from Yale to spend most of 1948 in Alaska as a Civilian Actress Technician (CAT), helping soldiers put

on shows.

Musser moved to New York after graduating from Yale. She was involved with the experimental theatre company Studio 7, the 92nd Street Y, and the American Shakespeare Festival. Musser was a member of United Scenic Artists, the union for designers, artists and craftspeople working in film, theatre, opera, ballet, television, industrial shows, commercials and exhibitions.

The first Broadway production Musser designed was the original production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956). This was the start of Musser's long and successful Broadway career. Plays she designed over the next fifty years included original New York productions of *J. B.* (1958), *The Entertainer* (1958), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *The Lion in Winter* (1966), *The Birthday Party* (1967), *After the Fall* (1967), *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* (1971), *California Suite* (1976), *Children of a Lesser God* (1980), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Rumors* (1988), and *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1989), as well as many revivals of classic plays.

During this period, Musser was also Broadway's leading lighting designer for musicals, working on such shows as *Li'l Abner* (1956), *Mame* (1966), *Applause* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *A Chorus Line* (1975), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Ballroom* (1978), *42nd Street* (1980), *Dreamgirls* (1981), and *The Secret Garden* (1991). In addition to the Broadway productions for which Musser was most famous, she designed for dance; opera; and Off-Broadway, repertory, and international theater.

Over the course of her career, Musser was nominated for ten Tony Awards for Best Lighting Design, and won for *Follies*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Dreamgirls*. Musser's work on *A Chorus Line* was considered revolutionary because it was the first to use a computerized electronic lighting board, an advance that changed the field of lighting design. Musser was also a generous mentor to young lighting designers including Ken Billington, Brian Nason, Vivien Leone, David Lander, and Musser's life partner, Marilyn Rennagel.

Tharon Musser died in Newton, Connecticut, on April 19, 2009.

Scope and Content Note

The Tharon Musser lighting designs and papers contain materials collected and created by 20th-century American lighting designer Tharon Musser. The majority of this collection consists of lighting files that Musser designed for productions and companies. Other items include programs, posters, professional files, and personal files.

Lighting files consist of the charts, lists and drawings used to notate and document lighting designs. These documents include light plots, electrical equipment lists, followspot cue sheets, focus charts, track sheets, magic sheets, and lighting board bibles. Some lighting files also include scripts annotated with lighting cues and notes. Lighting files for productions, arranged in alphabetical order by title, document Musser's fifty year career, with lighting designs for such shows as *Mame* (1966), *Follies* (1971), *A Chorus Line* (1975), and *Dreamgirls* (1981).

One 3.5 inch floppy disk contains 4 computer files (143.6 kilobytes), two of which are probably resource forks. These files were created in *Lightwright*, a hybrid spreadsheet and database, designed specifically to manage professional lighting design paperwork. Hard copies of the *Lightwright* files, which document Musser's lighting design for *Street of Dreams*, exist in box 51, folder 3.

Festivals, regional, repertory, and touring companies Musser designed for included the American

Shakespeare Festival, American Theatre Festival, Center Theatre Group, National Repertory Theatre, and Phoenix Theatre. Summer stock companies represented here are Brooklyn Protestant Players, Cape May Playhouse, Group 20 Playhouse, High Times, and Pocono Playhouse. Industrial trade shows and fashion shows Musser designed included shows for companies such as Hooray USA, J.C. Penney, Lord and Taylor, Mais Oui, NEMA, and Revlon. The lighting files for operas are mainly from productions Musser designed for the Miami Opera Guild and the Dallas Civic Opera.

Musser's personal files include biographies, photographs, and materials from college and graduate school. There are course notes from Berea College and Yale University; an annotated copy of the play *The Twelve-Pound Look*, which Musser directed in 1945; coursework from Yale, such as a 1950 portfolio of photographs of lighting designs, and Musser's thesis on "The Business of Producing." Another folder of correspondence documents Musser's lifelong relationship with Berea College through her correspondence with Berea faculty members and administrators. There is one folder of programs, clippings and correspondence Musser collected while working as a Civilian Actress Technician on soldier shows in Alaska in 1948. Personal photographs, such as snapshots of Musser and various friends, family members, and colleagues are contained here.

A transcript of a 66-page interview Musser gave in 1986 as part of Southern Methodist University's Oral History Program is also held here. This transcript is available for research use only and may not be copied without permission. For permission to quote from the transcript, please contact the Head of Manuscripts, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 333 University Drive, Dallas TX 99293.

Professional files document Musser's career with correspondence, programs, scrapbooks, clippings, photographs, posters, contracts, and materials documenting awards and professional organizations. Most of the programs are from various theatres, dance and opera productions, and special events designed by Musser during the 1970s and 1980s, but there are three programs from the late 1950s and early 1960s. A scrapbook containing programs, letters, and articles documents Musser's early career with Studio 7, the 92nd Street Y, and the José Limón Dance Company. There are also general press clippings which contain newspaper and magazine articles on Musser's career and lighting design from 1963 to 1996. There are several programs and posters representing Broadway plays and musicals designed by Musser.

Professional files also contain headshots of Musser between 1964 and 1984. The many awards Musser received are documented here with certificates, clippings, programs, and letters of congratulation from friends and colleagues. Materials collected or created by Musser as a member of professional organizations, such as the 1984 National Designers Conference, the United Scenic Artists of America/Local 829, and the Stage Manager's Association are represented with meeting minutes, correspondence, official documentation, by-laws, meeting and conference agendas, newsletters, notes, drafts of contracts, and lists of conference attendees. Musser's contracts from various productions from 1956 to 1989 are also included. Correspondence consists mainly of the many letters of recommendation Musser wrote for former colleagues, thank you notes, requests for interviews, and letters between Musser and job applicants, which were usually accompanied by resumes. Musser also kept files on the physical dimensions and equipment set-up of major national theatres, arranged alphabetically by city name.

Arrangement: This collection is organized into Lighting Files, Personal Files, and Professional Files.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Charts

Correspondence

Diagrams

Technical drawings

Occupations

Lighting designers

Subjects

Lighting, Architectural and decorative -- Design and construction

Stage lighting

Stage lighting designers -- New York (State) -- New York

Theater -- New York (State) -- New York

Container List

Lighting Files

Productions

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| b. 65 f. 1 | <i>1600 Pennsylvania Avenue</i> 1976
<i>The 1940s Radio Hour</i> |
| b. 24 f. 3 | 1979 |
| b. 57 f. 1 | 1979 |
| | <i>42nd Street</i> |
| b. 24 f. 4-6 | 1980 |
| b. 25 f. 1-4 | 1981-1982 |
| b. 26 f. 1-5 | 1983-1985 |
| b. 27 f. 1-4 | 1985-1987 |
| b. 1 f. 1-3 | <i>The Act</i> 1977 |
| b. 1 f. 4-5 | <i>Adventures in the Skin Trade</i> 1991 |
| b. 1 f. 6 | <i>Advise and Consent</i> 1961 |
| b. 2 f. 1 | <i>After the Rain</i> 1967 |
| b. 2 f. 2 | <i>Alfie</i> 1964 |
| b. 2 f. 3 | <i>All in Good Time</i> 1965 |
| b. 3 f. 1 | <i>Andorra</i> 1963 |
| b. 3 f. 2-3 | <i>Any Wednesday</i> 1964 |
| b. 3 f. 4-8 | <i>Applause</i> 1970 |
| b. 4 f. 1-2 | <i>Artist Descending a Staircase</i> 1989 |
| b. 4 f. 3-5 | <i>Ballroom</i> 1978 |
| b. 4 f. 6 | <i>The Beaux Strategem</i> 1959 |
| b. 5 f. 1-2 | <i>Bermuda Triangle</i> 1997 |
| b. 5 f. 3-6 | <i>Biloxi Blues</i> 1984 |
| b. 5 f. 7 | <i>The Birthday Party</i> 1967 |
| b. 6 f. 1 | <i>Blood Red Roses</i> 1970 |
| b. 6 f. 2 | <i>The Boyfriend</i> 1970 |
| b. 6 f. 3 | <i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i> 1966
<i>Brighton Beach Memoirs</i> |
| b. 6 f. 4-5 | 1982 |
| b. 7 f. 1-3 | 1982 |
| b. 7 f. 4-6 | <i>Broadway Bound</i> 1986 |
| b. 8 f. 1-2 | <i>Cakewalk</i> 1996 |
| b. 8 f. 3-4 | <i>Calculated Risk</i> 1962
<i>California Suite</i> |
| b. 8 f. 5-6 | 1976 |
| b. 13 f. 7-8 | 1976 |
| b. 9 f. 1-5 | <i>Candide</i> 1974 |

Lighting Files (cont.)
Productions (cont.)

- b. 9 f. 6-7 *Catch My Soul* 1968
- b. 13 f. 1 *The Chairs/ The Lesson* 1958
- b. 13 f. 2-6 *Chapter Two* 1977-1979
- b. 14 f. 1 *Chess* 1986
- b. 14 f. 2-6 *Children of a Lesser God* 1980-1981
- b. 15 f. 1-3 *The Creation of the World and Other Business* 1972
- A Chorus Line*
- b. 16 f. 1-8 1975-1989
- b. 17 f. 1-4 1976-1990
- The Curse of Kulyenchikov*
- See Fools
- b. 18 f. 1-2 *Dangerous Music* 1988
- b. 18 f. 3-4 *A Delicate Balance* 1966
- b. 18 f. 5-6 *Doktor Faust* 1977
- b. 19 f. 1 *Don Juan* 1972
- Dreamgirls*
- b. 19 f. 2-5 1981
- b. 20 f. 1-5 1982-1985
- b. 21 f. 1-4 1985-1997
- b. 22 f. 2 *The Egghead* 1957
- b. 22 f. 3 *The Entertainer* 1958
- b. 22 f. 4 *Everything in the Garden* 1967
- b. 22 f. 5 *The Fig Leaves Are Falling* 1968
- b. 22 f. 6-7 *Five Finger Exercise* 1959
- b. 23 f. 1 *First Born* 1958
- b. 23 f. 2-5 *Follies* 1971-1972
- b. 24 f. 1 *Flora, the Red Menace* 1965
- b. 24 f. 2 *Fools* 1981
- b. 27 f. 5 *Garden of Sweets* 1961
- b. 27 f. 6 *Giants, Sons of Giants* 1962
- b. 27 f. 7 *Gingham Dog* 1969
- b. 27 f. 8 *God's Favorite* 1974
- b. 28 f. 1 *The Good Doctor* 1973
- b. 28 f. 2-3 *Good News* 1978
- b. 28 f. 4-5 *Golden Boy* 1964
- b. 29 f. 1-4 *The Goodbye Girl* 1993
- The Great God Brown*
- b. 29 f. 5 1959
- b. 31 f. 7 1972
- b. 31 f. 8 *The Great Indoors* 1966
- b. 30 f. 1-2 *Hallelujah, Baby!* 1967

Lighting Files (cont.)
Productions (cont.)

- b. 30 f. 3-5 *Here's Love* 1963-1964
- b. 30 f. 6 *A Hole in the Head* 1957
- b. 31 f. 1 *High Time* 1953
- b. 31 f. 2 *House of Flowers* 1968
- b. 39 f. 4-6 *I Ought to Be in Pictures* 1980
- b. 31 f. 3 *Infernal Machine* 1958
- b. 31 f. 4-6 *J.B.* 1958-1962
- b. 33 f. 1-5 *Jake's Women* 1992
- Jerry's Girls*
- b. 32 f. 1-2 1984
- b. 33 f. 6 1984
- b. 34 f. 1-2 *Kelly* 1965
- b. 34 f. 3 *Kicks: The Showgirl Musical* 1984
- b. 34 f. 4-5 *The Knife* 1987
- Laughter on the 23rd Floor*
- b. 34 f. 6-7 1993
- b. 35 f. 1-2 1993
- b. 35 f. 3 *Laurette* 1960
- b. 35 f. 4 *Last Licks* 1979
- b. 35 f. 5 *Li'l Abner* 1956
- b. 35 f. 6 *The Lion in Winter* 1966
- A Little Night Music*
- b. 35 f. 7-8 1973
- b. 36 f. 1-4 1973-1974
- b. 36 f. 5-6 *London Suite* 1994
- b. 37 f. 1-3 *The Lonesome West* 1999
- b. 37 f. 4-6 *Long Day's Journey into Night* 1956-1957
- b. 37 f. 7-8 *The Long Dream* 1960
- b. 38 f. 1-5 *Lost in Yonkers* 1991-1993
- b. 39 f. 1-3 *The Lovers* 1968-1969
- b. 42 f. 3-6 *Mack and Mabel* 1974
- b. 39 f. 7-8 *Maggie Flynn* 1968
- b. 40 f. 1 *The Makropoulous Secret* 1957
- b. 40 f. 2 *Malcolm* 1965
- b. 43 f. 1-10 *Mame* 1966-1970
- b. 40 f. 3 *Marathon '33* 1963
- b. 40 f. 4-5 *Me and Bessie* 1975
- Merlin*
- b. 40 f. 6 1982
- b. 41 f. 1 1982
- b. 41 f. 2 *Merton of the Movies* 1977

Lighting Files (cont.)
Productions (cont.)

- b. 41 f. 3 *Minor Miracle* 1965
- b. 41 f. 4 *Monique* 1957
- b. 41 f. 5-6 *A Month of Sundays* 1987
- b. 42 f. 1-2 *The Mooney Shapiro Songbook* 1981
- b. 44 f. 1 *Mother Courage and Her Children* 1963
- b. 44 f. 2 *A Mother's Kiss* 1996
- b. 44 f. 3 *Murder in the Cathedral* 1958
- b. 44 f. 4 *Night Watch* 1972
- b. 44 f. 5 *Nowhere to Go But Up* 1962
- b. 44 f. 6-7 *The Odd Couple (Female Version)* 1985
- b. 45 f. 1-2 *On the Town* 1971
- b. 45 f. 3-6 *Once Upon a Mattress* 1959-1961
- b. 45 f. 7 *The Orphan* 1973
- b. 46 f. 1 *Only in America* 1959
- b. 46 f. 2-3 *Open Admissions* 1984
- b. 46 f. 4-6 *Pacific Overtures* 1975-1976
- b. 47 f. 1 *Peer Gynt* 1960
- b. 47 f. 2-3 *Price of Fame* 1990
- b. 47 f. 4-7 *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* 1971-1973
- b. 57 f. 2-3 *Private Lives* 1983
- b. 47 f. 8 *The Promise* 1967
- b. 48 f. 1-3 *Putting It Together* 1993
- The Real Thing*
- b. 57 f. 4-5 1983
- b. 64 f. 1 1985
- b. 48 f. 4 *The Rivalry* 1959
- b. 48 f. 5 *The Roast* 1980
- b. 48 f. 6 *Romantic Comedy* 1979
- b. 49 f. 1-3 *Romeo and Juliet* 1977-1978
- b. 64 f. 2-5 *Rumors* 1988-1989
- b. 49 f. 4 *Saint Joan* 1974
- Same Time Next Year*
- b. 49 f. 5-6 1975
- b. 50 f. 1 1975
- b. 50 f. 2 *Saturday Night Kid* 1957
- b. 50 f. 3-4 *Scapino* 1974-1975
- The Secret Garden*
- b. 50 f. 5 1991
- b. 66 f. 1-5 1991-1992
- b. 50 f. 6 *The Shadow of a Gunman* 1958
- b. 50 f. 7 *Shanto Rao* 1957

Lighting Files (cont.)

Productions (cont.)

- b. 51 f. 1-2 *Shinbone Alley* 1957
- b. 65 f. 9 *Sondheim: A Musical Tribute* 1973
- b. 70 f. 1 *Special Occasions* 1982
- b. 65 f. 2 *Spofford* 1969-1970
- Street of Dreams*
- b. 51 f. 3-4 1999
- er. 1 1999
- (4 Computer Files (143.6 Kilobytes.))
- b. 51 f. 6-8 *The Sunshine Boys* 1972-1974
- b. 70 f. 2-3 *Teddy and Alice* 1987
- b. 65 f. 3 *There Must Be a Pony* 1962
- They're Playing Our Song*
- b. 70 f. 4-6 1978-1979
- b. 71 f. 1-3 1979-1981
- b. 52 f. 1-3 *Topper* 1997
- b. 52 f. 4-5 *The Trial of the Cantonsville Nine* 1979-1980
- Tribute*
- b. 52 f. 6-7 1978
- b. 53 f. 1 1978
- b. 65 f. 4 *The Tumbler* 1960
- b. 91 f. 3 *The Turn of the Screw* 1957
- b. 53 f. 2-3 *Uncle Vanya* 1995
- b. 65 f. 5 *A Way of Life* 1969
- b. 65 f. 6 *We Take the Tour* 1962
- b. 53 f. 4-6 *Welcome to the Club* 1989
- b. 54 f. 1-4 *Whose Life Is it Anyway?* 1979
- b. 65 f. 7 *This Winter's Hobby* 1966
- The Wiz*
- b. 54 f. 5 1974
- b. 55 f. 1-5 1975
- b. 65 f. 8 *Yuriko* 1960
- b. 56 f. 1-5 *Ziegfeld* 1988

Dance Companies

- b. 56 f. 6-11 Carmen Amaya-Becker Jazz Dance 1955-1962
- b. 58 f. 1-17 Boston Dance Festival-Paul Taylor 1954-1962
- b. 59 f. 1-18 Humphrey-José Limón 1953-1970

Repertory Theatre Companies, Festivals, Schools, and Tours

- b. 2 f. 4 American Academy of Dramatic Arts 1964
- b. 2 f. 5 American Repertory Theatre 1961
- b. 62 f. 1-9 American Shakespeare Festival 1957-1959
- b. 2 f. 6 American Theatre Festival 1961

Lighting Files (cont.)

Repertory Theatre Companies, Festivals, Schools, and Tours (cont.)

Center Theatre Group

- b. 10 f. 1-8 1969-1972
- b. 11 f. 1-13 1972-1979
- b. 12 f. 1-9 1979-1989
- b. 22 f. 1 Emerson College 1983
- National Repertory Theatre
- b. 60 f. 1-5 1961-1966
- b. 61 f. 1-3 1967-1981
- b. 73 f. 8 New Phoenix Repertory Company 1972
- b. 51 f. 5 Studio 19 1983
- b. 63 f. 1-10 Summer Stock 1949-1967
- b. 63 f. 11-16 Industrial and Fashion Shows 1956-1976

Opera

Dallas Civic Opera

- b. 67 f. 1-7 1970
- b. 68 f. 1-8 1971-1972
- b. 69 f. 1-9 1973-1974
- b. 73 f. 7 1977
- b. 90 f. 1-9 1975-1976
- b. 91 f. 1-2 1976-1977

Miami Opera Guild

- b. 71 f. 4-9 1974-1975
- b. 72 f. 1-7 1976-1977
- b. 73 f. 1-6 1977-1978

Personal Files

- b. 74 f. 1-4 Berea College 1945-1992
- b. 74 f. 5-6 Biographies and Interviews 1975-1995
- b. 75 f. 1 Civilian Actress Technician 1948
- b. 75 f. 2 Photographs undated
- b. 75 f. 3-7 Yale University 1947-1983

Professional Files

Awards

- b. 76 f. 1-3 Certificates and Correspondence 1970-2000
- b. 84 f. 2 Certificates 1970-1975

Statues and Plaques

- b. 87 f. 1-6 1972-1977
- b. 88 1978-1998
- b. 89 f. 1-5 1979-1996
- b. 77 f. -4 Clippings 1954-1996

Contracts

- b. 78 f. 1-3 1967-1979

- Professional Files (cont.)
- Contracts (cont.)
- b. 79 f. 1-4 1977-1989
- b. 80 f. 1-3 Correspondence 1975-1996
- b. 80 f. 4 Photographs 1964-1984
- Posters
- b. 84 f. 3 1958-1986
- b. 85 1973
- b. 80 f. 5-7 Professional Organizations 1956-2000
- Programs
- b. 81 f. 1-4 1956-1989
- b. 82 f. 1-3 1970-1989
- b. 84 f. 1 Programs, Drawings, and Photographs 1963-1990
- b. 86 Scrapbook 1950s, 1960s
- Theatre Specifications and Information
- b. 82 f. 4 A-J 1969-1982
- b. 83 f. 1-4 H-Z 1982-1998