



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Beatrice Straight papers

1922-1987 [bulk 1968-1986]

*T-Mss 2014-113

Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2014

Summary

Creator: Straight, Beatrice

Title: Beatrice Straight papers

Date: 1922-1987 [bulk 1968-1986]

Size: 3.78 linear feet (9 boxes)

Source: Unknown.

Abstract: Beatrice Straight was an American actor who worked in theater, film, and television. The Beatrice Straight papers (1922-1987) document Straight's personal and professional life through correspondence, clippings, publications, legal records, photographs, and writings. The bulk of the material dates from 1968 to 1986.

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Preferred citation: Beatrice Straight papers, *T-Mss 2014-113. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Processing note: Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2014 Beatrice Straight's alphabetical file arrangement was maintained. Some materials were sorted by subject or material type.

Creator History

Beatrice Straight was an actor who appeared in theater, film, and television. Straight was born in 1914 in Old Westbury, New York to Willard Straight and Dorothy Whitney Straight. In the 1920s, Straight's mother and stepfather, Leonard Elmhirst, founded the Dartington Hall Community in Devon, England. The Dartington community included a progressive school, which Straight attended from the age of twelve. In 1936, Straight worked with Michael Chekhov to establish the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington. The studio trained actors according to Chekhov's techniques. Straight continued to work with the company when it relocated to Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1939. In the 1980s, Straight established the Michael Chekhov Studio in New York City to continue the teaching work of the original Chekhov Theatre Studio.

Straight performed in Broadway and Off-Broadway plays, as well as in London and touring productions. She won a Tony Award for Best Featured Actress for her performance in *The Crucible* (1953). She had a prolific career in television, where she had roles in shows such as *Beacon Hill* (1975) and television movies such as *Chiller* (1985) and *Under Siege* (1986). She appeared in the film *Poltergeist* in 1982, and won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Network* (1976).

Straight married actor Peter Cookson in 1949, after acting with him in the play *The Heiress* (1948). It was the second marriage for both. The couple had two sons, Gary and Anthony (Tony) Cookson. Peter Cookson died in 1990. Straight died in 2001 in North Ridge, California.

Scope and Content Note

The Beatrice Straight papers (1922-1987, bulk 1968-1986) concern Straight's personal and professional life, including her acting career, her charitable activities, her finances, and her friendships and family relationships. The papers contain correspondence, clippings, publications, legal records, photographs, and writings.

Subjects documented in Straight's alphabetical files include her Academy Award; her efforts to have scripts (chiefly those written by her husband) produced; her interest in parapsychology; plays, films, and television shows she worked on; the Dartington Hall Community; the Chekhov Theatre Studio and the Michael Chekhov Studio; and the death of her friend, author Nancy Wilson Ross. Correspondence in the alphabetical files consists almost entirely of letters and cards to Straight; very little of Straight's own writing is present. The files include letters from publicist Robert H. Tompkins, Harold M. Sherman, and family members. Chekhov Theater Studio material includes a compilation of documents chronicling the company's development from 1934 to 1948; the documents are photocopies of records that were held at Dartington Hall. The alphabetical files also contain contracts (mostly from the 1980s); scripts by Peter Cookson and Tony Cookson; writings by Nancy Wilson Ross; and legal correspondence regarding Straight's and Peter Cookson's investments in the Monetary Group, a tax shelter whose management was convicted of fraud in the 1980s.

The collection also contains materials related to children's entertainment. These include scripts, budgets, and correspondence for a television project called *Once Upon a Castle*, which was to be produced by Straight and written by Arnold Sundgaard, Susan Dias, and Tamara Wilcox. The children's entertainment materials also include Frances Kanes Hazlitt's film treatment of *Gabriel and the Creatures*, and Hazlitt's 1953 correspondence with Walt Disney Productions regarding the treatment.

The collection contains a small amount of miscellaneous, unsorted records, dating from 1922 to 1985. Miscellaneous records include short biographies and profiles of Straight; brief notes written to Straight; a diary documenting a trip to India, possibly dating to the 1930s; and letters Straight wrote to her mother from 1959 to 1964. The earliest document is a 1922 brochure for the San Francisco Stage Guild's School of the Arts of the Theatre.

Photographs are mostly of unidentified people and productions; the bulk date from 1968 to 1970. A small number of photographs of Straight are present.

Arrangement: The collection is arranged in the following categories: Alphabetical Files, Children's Entertainment, Miscellaneous Records, and Photographs.

Key Terms

Subjects

Acting -- Study and teaching

Children's television programs -- United States

Occupations

Actresses

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence

Photographs

Scripts

Names

Chekhov, Michael, 1891-1955

Cookson, Peter

Dartington Hall (Totnes, England) -- Arts Centre -- Chekhov Theatre Studio

Container List

Alphabetical Files

- b. 1 f. 1-7 A - C 1976-1979
Includes copies of Chekhov Theatre Studio documents.
- b. 2 f. 1-8 C - F 1973-1980
Includes copies of Chekhov Theatre Studio documents.
- b. 3 f. 1-8 F - Y 1975-1980
- b. 3 f. 9-11 A - B 1982-1986
- b. 4 f. 1-7 C 1980-1986
Includes contracts and a script by Peter Cookson.
- b. 5 f. 1-8 C-L 1981-1986
- b. 6 f. 1-8 M-T 1980-1987
Includes Nancy Wilson Ross materials.
- b. 7 f. 1-4 S-W 1982-1986
- b. 8 f. 1-4 Children's Entertainment 1953, 1957, 1970s
- b. 7 f. 5-7 Children's Entertainment 1976, 1978
- b. 8 f. 5-10 Miscellaneous Records 1922-1985
- b. 9 f. 1-8 Photographs 1968-1978