

Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1926-1951

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Seattle Repertory Playhouse
Title	Seattle Repertory Playhouse records
Dates	1926-1951 (inclusive) 1926 1951
Quantity	36.44 cubic feet
Collection Number	1284, 1556
Summary	Records of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse
Repository	University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Special Collections University of Washington Libraries Box 352900 Seattle, WA 98195-2900 Telephone: 206-543-1929 Fax: 206-543-1931 speccoll@uw.edu
Access Restrictions	Open to all users.
Languages	English

Historical Note

Burton and Florence James opened the Seattle Repertory Playhouse in 1928 as a forum for “Classical” and socio-political theater and as an alternative to what they perceived as Seattle’s limited theatrical choices. Until the SRP, Seattle theater bills were dominated by vaudeville, touring Broadway companies, and local stock performances of light comedy. Florence summed up the SRP’s credo in a 1939 radio interview: “The Repertory Playhouse has always believed true theater should mirror the ideals and aspirations of the people . . . To reflect life, to explain it, to inspire love toward some of its aspects and detestation towards others, is well within our province.” Participating prominently alongside the Jameses was Albert Ottenheimer, a 1927 magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the UW. Ottenheimer did nearly everything for the Playhouse, serving as a press agent, writing and directing plays, and acting in more than 150 roles.

The emphasis on “classical” works allowed Seattle’s social leaders to demonstrate a fashionable support for the arts through their support for the company. One particularly successful production was Ottenheimer’s adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s long dramatic poem, *Peer Gynt*, which ran in 1930-31. Not only did the play sellout its first week before opening night--and remain sold out throughout its run--but one actress recalled how “practically the whole Norwegian community in Seattle became involved in the production.” Burton also directed the Washington State Theatre, a touring company which performed classics for high school audiences beginning in 1936. Among the plays it staged were Oliver Goldsmith’s “*She Stoops to Conquer*,” and William Shakespeare’s “*The Taming of the Shrew*.” Funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and supervised by the Washington State Department of

Education, the Washington State Theatre was the first of its kind in the United States. The company stretched the Rockefeller Foundation's \$35,000 for three seasons, but unfortunately by 1938 no more money was forthcoming from either private or public sources in depression-barren Washington. The Playhouse was hurt by the army drawing away so many young actors from its corps at the outset of American military involvement in World War Two, but it managed to make due, often recruiting high school students. With the productions of patriotic revues such as "Thumbs Up"--"axing the Axis with song and satire"--as well as the staging of recruiting spectacles, the Playhouse actively supported the war effort.

In addition to private funding, the Seattle Repertory Playhouse also received funding from the Federal Theatre Project, a contested New Deal program designed both to promote the theater and to provide work-relief. (One contentious Congressman snarled that it was "a patronage vehicle for Reds." Another grumbled about the plays produced, "Now if you want that kind of salacious tripe, very well, vote for it, but if anybody has any interest in decency on stage, if anyone has an interest in real cultural values, you will not find it in this kind of junk.") By the mid-1930s, the company gave increasing prominence to socially critical productions which violated Seattle's social and cultural conventions, and established a controversial sponsorship of the Negro Repertory Company under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project. Many individuals withdrew their patronage in protest.

The intermittent conflict culminated in the Jameses' 1947 investigation as alleged communists by the Canwell Committee, the state's un-American activities panel. Both Florence and Burton refused on Constitutional grounds to answer the bombastic Albert Canwell's interrogations on whether or not they were Communist party members. (Both James were social activists and Florence held a naive and uninformed admiration of the USSR, but the Committee offered no authentic evidence to support its contention that they were working for the violent subversion of the U.S. government or were agents of Moscow). Charged with contempt of the legislature as a result of this "willful refusal," Burton was convicted, fined \$250 and sentenced to thirty days in jail, suspended because of his increasingly failing health. Identically charged, Florence's first trial ended in a hung jury; the subsequent retrial ended in her conviction, which carried a \$125 fine and a suspended thirty-day sentence. The Canwell controversy, and the long-simmering controversies generally, cost the Playhouse much necessary financial support, especially from Seattle's social elite. In 1951, a Yale law professor who studied the Canwell hearings concluded that "serious damage was done to the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, whose loss of patronage is traceable to the highly dubious testimony of [committee] witnesses." (The James were allowed neither to call their own witnesses nor cross-examine accusers). The Playhouse's lax business practices compounded the fiscal problems. The mounting controversies and the financial problems, many of them self-induced, forced the Playhouse's closure in 1951. Burton suffered a fatal heart attack shortly afterwards. Florence moved to Canada where she continued her theater work. She died there in 1988.

Content Description

Correspondence, interviews, players, reports, schedules, minutes, ephemera, financial records, scripts, newsletters, logs, news releases, programs, speeches and writings, drawings, set designs, mailing lists, legal documents, surveys, photographs, music scores, posters.

Use of the Collection

Alternative Forms Available

[View selections from this collection in digital format](#)

Restrictions on Use

Creator's literary rights transferred to the University of Washington Libraries.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

Arranged in 4 accessions:

- Accession no. 1284-001, Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1936-1942
- Accession no. 1556-001, Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1932-1950
- Accession no. 1556-003, Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1926-1951
- Accession no. 1556-004, Seattle Repertory Playhouse programs, 1928-1950

Bibliography

For additional information, see Ronald O. West, *Left Out: The Seattle Repertory Playhouse, Audience Inscription and the Problem of Leftist Theatre During the Depression Era*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UW, 1993; Chet Skreen, "Today's Seattle Theater Owes A Lot to the 'Old Rep'." *Seattle Times* 30 January 1977 magazine pp. 8-12 and 6 February 1977 magazine pp. 4-6; and Barry B. Witham, "The Playhouse and the Committee," in [The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics](#), edited by Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.

Related Materials

See the papers of Florence James, ([collection 2117](#)), and the records of the Washington State Theatre, contained in accession no. [4081-001](#). In addition to information on the SPR, the Florence James collection contains her unpublished autobiography, *Fists Upon A Star*, and an unpublished biography of Florence and Burton by Robert Johnson. The WST records provide a wealth of additional information about individuals prominent at the Playhouse, including the Jameses and Ottenheimer. The Albert M. Ottenheimer Papers are housed at the University of Oregon.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Accession No. 1284-001: Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1936-1942

0.21 cubic feet (1 box)

Scope and Content: Correspondence, interviews, plays; ca. 1936-1942. Plays are student works. Interview is with Burton James. Letters are to Marijo.

Restrictions on Access: Open to all users.

Acquisition Info: Donor: Florence James, November 7, 1969.

Description

Seattle Repertory Playhouse records

Accession No. 1556-001: Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1932-1950

0.91 cubic feet (2 boxes and 1 pkg.)

Scope and Content: Correspondence, reports, schedules, ticket reports, minutes, ephemera, and lists, 1932-1950. Records of a theater company, mostly kept by Bette Anderson, a staff member. Much concerns the Playhouse's children's theater, children's classes and tours.

[View inventory/container list for this accession](#)

Restrictions on Access: Open to all users.

Acquisition Info: Donor: Mrs. John Stoddart (Bette Anderson), March 8, 1971.

Description

Seattle Repertory Playhouse records

Accession No. 1556-003: Seattle Repertory Playhouse records, 1926-1951

37.79 cubic feet

Scope and Content: Correspondence, financial records, scripts, minutes, newsletters, logs, news releases, programs, speeches and writings, drawings, set designs, mailing lists, legal documents, surveys, photographs, musical scores and posters, 1926-1951. Records of a professional theater company. Also documents investigations of the company by the Canwell Committee, Washington State legislative committee on "un-American activities," ca 1948-49 and records of a Washington State Recreation and Cultural Resource Survey, 1946-47.

[View inventory/container list for this accession](#)

Digital Content/Other Formats: [View selections from this accession in digital format](#)

Restrictions on Access: Open to all users.

Acquisition Info: Donor: Florence B. James and others, 1960, 1969, 1989.

Description

Seattle Repertory Playhouse records

Accession No. 1556-004: Seattle Repertory Playhouse programs, 1928-1950

0.63 cubic feet (2 boxes)

Scope and Content: Programs of the theater company's productions; 1928-1950. Some programs are copies.

[View inventory/container list for this accession](#)

Restrictions on Access: Open to all users.

Acquisition Info: Donor: UW Libraries, Special Collections and Preservation Division, February 20, 1998.

Description

Seattle Repertory Playhouse programs

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Theatrical companies--Washington (State)--Seattle--Archives

Personal Names :

James, Burton W

James, Florence Bean, 1892-1988

Corporate Names :

Federal Theatre Project (Seattle, Wash.)

Seattle Repertory Playhouse--Archives

Washington State Theater

Other Creators :

Personal Names :

Ottenheimer, Albert M

(creator)

Corporate Names :

Seattle Junior Programs, Inc

(creator)

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Personal Papers/Corporate Records (University of Washington)

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