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Billy Rose Theatre Division**

Guide to the

Carmen Capalbo papers

1936-1991

*T-Mss 2010-018

Compiled by Diana Bertolini, June 2013

Summary

Creator: Capalbo, Carmen

Title: Carmen Capalbo papers, 1936-1991

Size: 4.53 linear feet (12 boxes)

Source: Source unknown.

Abstract: The Carmen Capalbo papers (1936-1991) consist mainly of professional files of American director and producer, Carmen Capalbo (1925-2010), but also include a small amount of personal material. The bulk of this collection is composed of production files made up of scripts, scores, programs, production fact sheets, budgets, casting notes, correspondence with collaborators regarding productions, fan mail, agreements, contracts, posters, flyers, and press releases. Personal miscellany and casting files from the Spur production company are also present.

Access: Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photography and photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required. Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Copyright information: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

Preferred citation: Carmen Capalbo papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Creator history

Carmen Charles Capalbo was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on November 1, 1925. His theatrical career began during his childhood when he acted and later directed in local community theater. While still in high school, the precocious Capalbo was producing, directing, and performing in a Harrisburg Sunday morning radio show called "The Children's Playhouse." Capalbo served in the Army during World War II. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was wounded in a mortar attack. He received a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. After the war, Capalbo briefly studied Drama at Yale University, but left his studies in 1946 to pursue a career in the New York theater.

In New York, Capalbo and a Yale classmate, Leo Lieberman, started a theater company called the Spur. They put on shows at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, where Capalbo directed four productions, including Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* Capalbo got his first Broadway work in 1952, stage managing three imported French Productions, *Les Fausses Confidences*, *Occupe-toi d'Amelie*, and *Hamlet*, from the *Compagnie Madeleine Renaud / Jean-Louis Barrault*. His career also included a brief foray into the world of Hollywood, where he worked as a reader and story editor for the CBS television program, *Studio One in Hollywood*. He directed *The Power and the Glory* for the *Play of the Week* series.

While at Studio One, Capalbo met Stanley Chase, who would become his producing partner. Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's blockbuster *The Threepenny Opera*, which had opened in Berlin in 1928 and proceeded to sweep the rest of Europe in the prewar years, had failed on Broadway in 1933. In 1952, Capalbo attended a concert of a new translation of the show, written by Marc Blitzstein. The concert, held at Brandeis University, was conducted by Leonard Bernstein, and featured Weill's widow, Lotte Lenya, in the role she had originated in the 1928 Berlin production. Capalbo became obsessed with the idea of mounting a production of this new translation, starring Lenya.

Capalbo and Chase approached Lenya, and despite their inexperience, she allowed them to produce the show with Capalbo directing, and agreed to play Jenny once again at the Theatre de Lys (now the Lucile Lortel Theatre.) The show debuted in a limited engagement in 1954, but received such a strong response from audience and critics that it came back for a return engagement in 1955, running for 2,611 performances, setting a record for off-Broadway. Besides Lenya herself, who received the only Tony Award ever given for an off-Broadway performance, the cast also included Scott Merrill, Bea Arthur, and Jo Sullivan.

Capalbo followed up this success by directing a half season of three premieres of plays by prominent authors at Broadway's Bijou Theatre. The three plays, produced by Capalbo and Chase, were Graham Greene's *The Potting Shed*, Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and William Saroyan's *The Cave Dwellers*. In 1962, he directed the hit comedy *Seidman and Son*.

Capalbo spent many years working on a version of another Brecht and Weill opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, adapted by Arnold Weinstein. The production opened at the Anderson Theatre off-Broadway in 1970, starring Barbara Harris and Estelle Parsons, but received a negative critical response and closed in a week. Another project Capalbo devoted many years to was a re-vamped version of Cole Porter's *Nymph Errant*, which was never produced in New York. He was also attached to a musical, *Notre Dame de Paris*, adapted from Victor Hugo's novel by Faith Flagg, Cherney Berg, and Phil Springer, which was not produced.

Capalbo directed a musical adaptation of Chaim Potok's novel, *The Chosen*, with book by Potok, lyrics by Mitchell Bernard, and music by Philip Springer. After working closely with the authors for years, Capalbo quit the production during its preview period. The show opened in January 1988, with Mitchell Maxwell directing.

Capalbo was married to dancer Patricia McBride, but they later divorced. They had a son, Marco, and a daughter, Carla. Capalbo died of emphysema in New York City on March 14, 2010.

Scope and content note

The Carmen Capalbo papers consist mainly of production materials created or collected by Capalbo in his capacity as a director and producer of Broadway and off-Broadway plays and musicals from the

1940s to the 1980s. Production materials document the work of the director from both the creative and the business side, with scripts; notes; scores, costume sketches; correspondence with collaborators, fans, friends, and actors; programs; budgets; and press releases.

Production files, arranged in alphabetical order by title, include casting notes from *As I Lay Dying*, a script from *The Cave Dwellers*, a catalog of Leiber and Stoller songs, compiled for an unidentified 1976 project, and a letter from Elsa Walden requesting audition for *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Documents created and collected by Capalbo while he was directing *The Chosen* are set designs, casting notes and lists, articles on Jewish history collected for research purposes, and multiple script drafts with comments and revisions from Capalbo and his collaborators. Also present is and market research on home video trends, a business plan for premises renovations, and a proposal for suggested programming for a proposed television program, *Night in Apollo City*.

Materials created and collected by Capalbo while he was directing *Notre Dame de Paris* consist of correspondence between Capalbo and producer Lorin E. Price, lyricist Faith Flagg, and other collaborators regarding script and lyric changes; a fantasy *New York Times* rave Flagg sent to Capalbo; notes on Capalbo's meetings with members of creative team; and lyrics, full scripts, and script excerpts with changes and revisions. Materials created and collected by Capalbo as director of *Nymph Errant* include budgets, casting notes with resumes, clippings on actors, and correspondence with producers, making arrangements for the Toronto production; a 1982 letter from Amos Abrams discussing the merits of Capalbo's adaptation in context of changing social mores; notes for contacts, and production details to be agreed on; multiple script drafts, color costume drawings; and scores.

Other production files contained here include correspondence received by Capalbo when he was directing *The Potting Shed*: a letter requesting tickets, and a fan letter from actor Eric Berry. Documents created of collected by Capalbo while directing *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* consist of programs, an invitation to the first preview, a press release, congratulatory letters and telegrams, and letters from colleagues discussing the production's quality. There are documents created of collected by Capalbo as director of *Seidman and Son*, such as programs from the Boston and New York engagements, fabric swatches for set pieces, a production fact sheet, and flyers. There is a program, contact sheet, budget, and script for *Slowly, By Thy Hand Unfurled*. There is a script (probably from the Brandeis University concert version), negotiations and agreements with Bertolt Brecht's agent, Tommy Banyai, Marc Blitzstein, and Kurt Weill's widow, Lotte Lenya, and an agreement authorizing the Theatre on Film and Tape archive to film a 1980 Theatre de Lys production of *The Threepenny Opera*.

There are four scrapbooks containing programs, clippings, press releases, flyers, and posters from *The Cave Dwellers*, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *The Potting Shed*, *The Power and the Glory*, *Seidman and Son*, *Slowly, By Thy Hand Unfurled*.

One folder of miscellaneous personal and professional materials contains a 1990 note from Gino Giglio, sending articles of interest; management notes, budgets, and a suggested season for the Hartman Theatre Company; head shots of actresses Jenny Agutter and Carolyn Marble; 1983 Jazz Festival programs; a 1991 program from the University Chamber Orchestra, with a resume of composer C. P. First (a relative of Capalbo's); business cards for Capalbo's daughter, Carla Capalbo, stylist, and another relative, Bill First, photographer; and Capalbo's 1936 diphtheria immunization card.

The Capalbo and Lieberman Talent Files were created for the *Spur*, a repertory company Capalbo founded with Yale classmate, Leo Lieberman in 1946. This physical database on actors and actresses consists of cards arranged in alphabetical order, providing basic information such as address, height, weight, education, and professional experience.

This collection includes 29 audiocassettes and 1 betamax videocassette. These cassettes mainly consist of live performance and demo recordings of *The Chosen*, but also include demos, live recordings, and studio recordings of *Nymph Errant*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, *Joy of the Sabbath*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and other projects. Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following groups: Productions, Miscellaneous Personal and Professional Files, and Capalbo and Lieberman Talent Files.

Key terms

Subjects

Musicals -- New York (N.Y.) -- 20th century
Theater -- New York (N.Y.) -- 20th century
Theater -- Production and direction

Occupations

Directors (performing arts)
Producers (managers)
Stage Managers

Names

Capalbo, Carmen

Special formats

Correspondence
Notes
Photographs
Programs
Scores
Scripts

Container list

Productions, 1952-1988

- b.1 f.1-12 *The Cave Dwellers-The Chosen*
 - b.11 f.1-2 *The Cave Dwellers-The Power and the Glory*
Scrapbooks containing documents collected or created by Capalbo as director of The Cave Dwellers, The Good Soldier Schweik, The Potting Shed, and The Power and the Glory.
 - b.12 f.1-3 *The Cave Dwellers-Slowly, By Thy Hand Unfurled*
Scrapbooks containing documents collected or created by Capalbo as director of The Cave Dwellers; A Moon for the Misbegotten; Nymph Errant; Seidman and Son; and Slowly, By Thy Hand Unfurled.
 - b.2 f.1-4 *The Chosen*
 - b.3 f.1-5 *The Chosen*
 - b.4 f.1-6 *The Chosen-Notre Dame de Paris*
 - b.5 f.1-7 *Notre Dame de Paris-Nymph Errant*
 - b.6 f.1-9 *Nymph Errant*
 - b.10 f.2-4 *Nymph Errant* (Scores)
 - b.7 f.1-9 *Nymph Errant-The Threepenny Opera*
 - b.10 f.1 Unidentified Lotte Lenya Production (Photographs)
 - b.8 f.1 Miscellaneous Personal and Professional Items, 1936-1991
- ### Capalbo and Lieberman Talent Files, 1946
- b.8 f.2-5 A-I
 - b.9 f.1-5 J-Z