

Ed Wynn papers, 1890-1966 (bulk 1907-1966)
FLP.TH.C.WYNN

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This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit

May 08, 2012

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Free Library of Philadelphia: Rare Book Department
2011.11.11
Philadelphia, PA, 19103

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Summary Information

Repository	Free Library of Philadelphia: Rare Book Department
Creator	Wynn, Ed, 1886-1966
Title	Ed Wynn papers
Date [bulk]	Bulk, 1907-1966
Date [inclusive]	1890-1966
Extent	6.0 Linear feet 8 boxes
Language	English
Abstract	<p>This collection contains the correspondence and papers of actor and comedian Ed Wynn. The collection includes ideas for gags, box office records for staged productions, telegrams, postcards, 65 publicity photographs, 50 gag magazines, and family papers and mementos. There are also approximately 300 newspaper and magazine clippings about Wynn and his productions as well as 20 printed posters and artwork in various media of Wynn.</p>

Preferred Citation note

[Description and date of item], [Box and folder number], Ed Wynn papers, 1890-1966 (bulk 1907-1966), Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department -- Theatre Collection.

Biographical/Historical note

Ed Wynn (1886-1966) was a popular vaudeville comedian and radio, television, and film star best known for his quirky costumes, absurd inventions, slapstick humor, lisping voice, and high-pitched giggle. Wynn owned a pair of worn, oversized shoes (on which he famously spent \$1,500 on ongoing repairs) and a collection of 800 funny hats. He peddled and played his piano bicycle on stage, ate corn-on-the-cob using a typewriter carriage, and owned an eleven-foot pole (for people he wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole). His stage and radio personas included "The Fire Chief," "The Perfect Fool," and "Simple Simon," while memorable Walt Disney film roles featured Wynn's voice and likeness as the Mad Hatter in the animated *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and a laughing Wynn as Uncle Albert in *Mary Poppins* (1964). From 1949 to 1950 he hosted the variety program, *The Ed Wynn Show*, on CBS, the first network television show broadcasted via kinescope from Hollywood to the East Coast, one week after each episode aired. Wynn eschewed bawdy or off-color jokes in favor of slapstick humor, props, and puns. In 1930, *New York Times* journalist Brooks Atkinson praised Wynn as "the greatest buffoon of the day in the vein of pure comedy" (Moses and Brown 1934, 289).

Ed Wynn was born Isaiah Edwin Leopold on Tuesday, November 9, 1886 to Jewish immigrants, Joseph and Minnie Leopold, of 460 North Second Street in Philadelphia; his father owned a hat shop at 702 Arch Street. Wynn attended Central High School, but he ran away at age 15 to New England and worked on vaudeville productions first as a utility boy, then on stage in *American Grit* in 1902. Then, he toured the United States performing vaudeville sketches, including a two-year stint with Joe Louis, with whom he starred in the *Rah, Rah Boys*. According to Wynn, he changed his name as not to embarrass his family, though his father wondered how people would know Wynn was his son if he became famous. While appearing in Winnipeg in 1912, Wynn met the actor Frank Keenan, who was appearing in a show with his daughter, Hilda. She and Wynn married in 1914 and they had one son, Keenan, in 1916.

Wynn appeared in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1914* and again in 1915 and performed in *Doing Our Bit* (1917), *Sometime* (1918), and *Schubert Gaieties of 1919* before creating and starring in his own Broadway shows: *Ed Wynn's Carnival* (1920); *The Perfect Fool* (1921), the title of which gave him his subsequent nickname; *The Grab Bag* (1924); *Manhattan Mary* (1927); *Simple Simon* (1930; 1931); *The Laugh Parade* (1931); the drama *Alice Takat* (1936), a departure from Wynn's usual comedic productions; *Hooray for What* (1937); *Boys and Girls Together* (1940); and *Laugh, Town, Laugh* (1942). Wynn enjoyed working in front of a live audience, and often greeted theatre-goers at the door as they left his shows.

Despite his own financial success, he played a pivotal role in the Actors' Equity strike of 1919, speaking in Times Square against poor working conditions, which prompted the Shuberts and other Broadway theater managers and producers to blacklist him. Wynn responded by producing his own revue, *Ed Wynn's Carnival*. Because of the strike, he "was forced into business as a kind of one-man band: lyricist, director, producer, and star of his own shows" (Wynn 1959, 36).

Ed Wynn was also a radio pioneer, though he insisted on performing in costume and make-up in front of a live audience during his broadcasts. In 1922, he performed *The Perfect Fool* on WJZ in New York City, the first time an actor had performed a full Broadway show in this medium. In 1932,

Texaco sponsored his radio program, *The Fire Chief*, and in 1933 he invested in a new radio network, Amalgamated Broadcasting System (ABS) and became its president. However, due to time constraints and unhappiness with the management, Wynn pulled out of the network only one month after its debut, and ABS dissolved.

Accustomed to playing the funnyman, Wynn had difficulties transitioning to dramatic roles. In 1956, he was cast as a boxing trainer in Playhouse 90's *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, a made-for-television film about a boxer (played by Jack Palance). The production also starred Keenan Wynn, then working as a character actor, who had encouraged his father to branch out from his comedic roots and helped him struggle through the part. The result was an Emmy-nominated performance from the older Wynn. Their father-son experience on the set was chronicled in Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse's *The Man in the Funny Suit* (1960), for which Ed Wynn also received an Emmy nomination. Additional television roles included Kris Kringle in NBC's *Miracle on 34th Street* (1959) and Gramps in a live performance of *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1959). He also appeared on episodes of *Twilight Zone* (1959; 1963), *77 Sunset Strip* (1963), and *Bonanza* (1965). Additional film credits include *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), for which he was nominated for an Oscar, *Cinderfella* (1960), *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961), *Son of Flubber* (1963), and *That Darn Cat* (1965).

Though cheerful on stage, screen, and radio, Wynn's personal life was often tumultuous. He and Hilda divorced in 1937. Wynn later became the target of a publicized lawsuit in which his aunt and uncle, who had provided care for his wife, sued him for \$115,000 in back expenses. Two subsequent marriages, to Frieda Louise Mierse in 1937 and Dorothy Elizabeth Nesbitt in 1946, also ended in divorce. According to Keenan Wynn's autobiography, *Ed Wynn's Son* (1959), the two did not have a close relationship, as the patriarch was often touring the country while Keenan attended various boarding schools and stayed with his mother in the family's Great Neck, Long Island, home as well as apartments and hotels in New York City.

Ed Wynn died of cancer on June 19, 1966 in Beverly Hills, California, survived by his son and four grandchildren, including actor and writer Ned Wynn and writer, producer, and director Tracey Keenan Wynn. He left an indelible mark on the entertainment industry from his humble vaudeville beginnings to a Broadway, radio, television, and film career that spanned sixty years. Despite difficulties, he adapted his talents to fit the industry's changing mediums, and when his brand of comedy was outdated, he reinvented himself as a dramatic actor. He has three stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame: one each for radio, television, and motion pictures. The epitaph on his tombstone reads: "Dear God, Thank You."

References

Internet Broadway Database. 2011. "Ed Wynn," *IBDb.com*. <http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=5196>.

Internet Movie Database. 2011. "Ed Wynn," *IMDb.com*. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0943956/>.

Brown, John Mason, and Montrose Jonas Moses. 1934. *The American Theatre, as seen by its critics 1752-1934*. New York: Norton.

Parish, James Robert, and William T. Leonard. 1979. *The funsters*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House.

Reese, John. 1959. "Grand Old Man's New Career." *Saturday Evening Post* 231, no. 40: 24-117. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed August 3, 2011).

Wynn, Keenan, and James Brough. 1959. *Ed Wynn's son*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Scope and Contents note

The Ed Wynn papers contain newspaper and magazine clippings about the actor and reviews of his productions; correspondence including telegrams, letters, and postcards; publicity photographs; performance notes and ideas for gags; box office records, gag magazines, and family mementos. Researchers interested in early twentieth-century vaudeville, theatre writing and production, the art and structure of comedy, the advent of radio networks and programs, native Philadelphian and/or Jewish American performers, and the biography of Ed Wynn will find this collection valuable. There are seven series in the collection: I. Administrative records; II. Artwork; III. Correspondence; IV. Newspaper and magazine clippings; V. Photographs; VI. Publications; and VII. Realia.

Arrangement note

The collection is arranged in seven series: I. Administrative records; II. Artwork; III. Correspondence; IV. Newspaper and magazine clippings; V. Photographs; VI. Publications; and VII. Realia. There is also a folder labeled "Acquisitions history" that includes a catalog card, a newspaper article, and a letter discussing the collection.

Series I. Administrative records are organized alphabetically and include Wynn's ideas for gags, various lists of expenses, box office statements for *The Laugh Parade* in 1931, a handwritten musical score, and several invoices and documents from 1926 belonging to his brother, Leon Leopold, who was employed at Fox Films. Two handwritten box office statements for Fox films in Wrightsville, Pennsylvania (presumably belonging to Leon Leopold) are included in this series.

Series II. Artwork is organized by size in an oversized flat box (Box 7). It encompasses approximately 20 printed posters and sketches, cartoons, and caricatures of Wynn in ink, pencil, and crayon by various artists, mostly undated. Also included is a set design from *The Laugh Parade* and a framed poem titled "Remember This" by F. Collis Wideman, with a personal message from the poet to Wynn inscribed on the verso of the frame. The "Newspaper and magazine clippings" series contains approximately 300 reviews, images, interviews, and obituaries relating to Wynn from publications such as *The Philadelphia*

Evening Bulletin, *The New York Times*, and *Redbook* magazine. Two oversize collages of clippings are stored in separate flat files.

Series III. Correspondence is organized alphabetically. It comprises telegrams and letters, dating from approximately 1926-1933, to Wynn from professional contacts and well-wishers. This series also includes postcards received by the Leopold family, including 6 postcards from Wynn to his mother/parents (signed "Sonny, Ed") as he toured the country in 1907-1908, as well as postcards received by the Leopold family from friends and relations.

Series IV. Newspaper and magazine clippings are organized in chronological order by production name or genre.

Series V. Publications are arranged alphabetically. This series contains approximately 50 gag magazines and several newspapers and joke books, including issues of *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang*, *College Humor*, *Judge*, *Life*, *The New Yorker*, and *Smokehouse Monthly*, as well as a few loose pages and covers. The bulk of the series dates from 1925-1933; there are five issues of *The New York Racket* from 1890.

Series VI. Photographs includes 65 publicity stills and photographs of Wynn alone or with castmates, friends, and family members spanning his lifetime. Many feature Wynn from his vaudeville days as well as the actor as his trademark character, the Fire Chief.

Series VI. Realia includes a pair of worn leather weighted gloves and a small prayer book from the Beth Israel synagogue in Atlantic City, New Jersey, presumably belonging to Minnie Leopold.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

Free Library of Philadelphia: Rare Book Department 2011.11.11

Conditions Governing Access note

This collection is open for research use.

Conditions Governing Use note

The right of access to material does not imply the right of publication. Permission for reprinting, reproduction, or extensive quotation from the rare books, manuscripts, prints or drawings must be obtained through written application, stating the use to be made of the material. The reader bears the responsibility for any possible infringement of copyright laws in the publication of such material.

A reproduction fee will be charged if the material is to be reproduced in a commercial publication.

Custodial History note

The majority of the collection was purchased by Mr. Edward ("Scoop") Lieberman of the Philadelphia Press Association from Ed Wynn's mother's estate, 1965.

The Free Library of Philadelphia's Ed Wynn biography file, which included additional newspaper clippings and notes, was merged with the Ed Wynn papers for optimal access.

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

Gift of Edward ("Scoop") Lieberman, 1968.

Processing Information note

This collection is processed to the series and/or folder level.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Department of Special Collections: Ed Wynn Papers, 1920-1938, bulk 1931-1938.

Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) Theatre Collection: Playbills for *The Laugh Parade*, 1931-1932.

Controlled Access Headings

Genre(s)

- Clippings
- Correspondence
- Drawings (visual works)
- Ephemera
- Manuscripts
- Photographs

Geographic Name(s)

- Philadelphia (Pa.)

Personal Name(s)

- Wynn, Ed, 1886-1966

Subject(s)

- Comedy
- Drama
- Motion picture actors and actresses
- Theater
- Vaudeville

Administrative records

Collection Inventory

Acquisitions history 1965-1966

	Box	Folder
Text	1	1

Administrative records

Expenses and statements circa 1931

	Box	Folder
Text	1	2

Gag ideas circa 1931

	Box	Folder
Text	1	3

Lists, notes, and timing sheets circa 1931

	Box	Folder
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Artwork

Text	1	4
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Leon Leopold papers 1926, 1928

Text	Box	Folder
	1	5

Artwork

	Box
Framed poem by F. Collis Wideman	3
Set design of The Laugh Parade	3
Sketches and posters of Ed Wynn	3

Correspondence

	Box
Blank postcards	2

Letters and telegrams to Ed Wynn 1926-1933

	Box	Folder
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Newspaper and magazine clippings

Text	1	21
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Box

Postcards from Ed Wynn to mother/parents 1907-1908

2

Postcards to the Leopold family 1901-1911

2

Newspaper and magazine clippings

General biography 1922-1971, undated (Bulk, 1931-1939)

	Box	Folder
Text	1	6

Early vaudeville circa 1909, 1918

	Box	Folder
Text	1	7

Shubert Gaieties of 1919 1919 Jul 17 - 1919 Oct 18

	Box	Folder
Text	1	8

Newspaper and magazine clippings

Ed Wynn's Carnival 1920 Apr 5 - 1920 Aug 14

	Box	Folder
Text	1	9

The Perfect Fool 1921 Nov 7 - 1922 Jul 1

	Box	Folder
Text	1	10

The Grab Bag 1924 Oct 6 - 1925 Mar 14

	Box	Folder
Text	1	11

Manhattan Mary 1927 Sep 26 - 1928 May 12

	Box	Folder
Text	1	12

Simple Simon 1930 Feb 18 - 1930 Jun 14, 1931 Mar 9 - 1931 Mar 21

Newspaper and magazine clippings

	Box	Folder
Text	1	13

The Laugh Parade 1931 Nov 2 - 1932 May 21

	Box	Folder
Text	1	14

Alice Takat 1936

	Box	Folder
Text	1	15

Hooray For What! 1937 Dec 1 - 1938 May 21

	Box	Folder
Text	1	16

Boys and Girls Together 1940 Oct 1 - 1941 Mar 15

	Box	Folder
Text	1	17

Photographs

Laugh, Town, Laugh! 1942 Jun 22 - 1942 Jul 25

	Box	Folder
Text	1	18

Radio, television, film 1927-1957, undated

	Box	Folder
Text	1	19

Obituaries circa 1966 Nov 9

	Box	Folder
Text	1	20

Photographs**Box**

7

Oversize photos

Publicity photos of Ed Wynn

	Box	Folder
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Publications

Graphic materials	6	1
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Publicity photos of Ed Wynn and others

	Box	Folder
Graphic materials	6	2

Publications

Assorted programs and publications 1934, 1937, 1965

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	4	1

Fox Film Corporation newsletters 1927 Aug 20 -1927 Nov 12

	Box	Folder
Text	4	2

Gag magazines 1890-1891

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	4	3

Publications

Gag magazines 1923, 1925-1927

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	4	4

Gag magazines 1928-1930

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	4	5

Gag magazines 1931

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	5	1

Gag magazines 1932

	Box	Folder
Mixed materials	5	2

Gag magazines 1933

Realia

	Box	Folder
Graphic materials	5	3

Realia

Box

2

Family prayer book circa 1903-1942

8

Weighted leather gloves