Philadelphia Theatrical Papers
1877 - 1943
(bulk dates 1890s - 1920s)

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Historical and Biographical Note

The Philadelphia Theatrical Papers cover an expansive period in the history of the theater in America—the end of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was the home of numerous playhouses, opera houses, and other performing arts spaces. As touring companies increased, so did the accessibility of popular entertainment. By the turn of the twentieth century, musical comedy, operetta, and revue became the focus of theatrical performances.

In 1896 the creation of the Theatrical Syndicate catapulted the business of theatrical management into a new level of monopoly and profit. The six founders of this group were Charles Frohman (1860-1915), Samuel F. Nixon (1877?-1931), born Nirdlinger), J. Fred Zimmerman (1843-1925), Alf Hayman (1866-1921), Marc Klaw (1858-1936), and Abraham L. Erlanger (1860-1930). The goal of the Syndicate was to book the best theaters throughout the country and charge fees to contract the productions. It centralized the industry to accommodate the flourish of road companies at the time. By the 1900s they managed nearly seven hundred first-class theaters. In Philadelphia the Shubert brothers—Lee (1875?-1953), Sam S. (1877?-1905), and Jacob J. (1879-1963)—became the Syndicate’s rival. Even though the Shubert Theatre Corporation in the early 1920s became more powerful than the Syndicate, the development of the film industry and the reduction of touring companies precipitated the demise of these monopolistic agencies.

Many of the productions and theaters named in the collection are part of a rich American theatrical history. Philadelphia’s Broad Street Theatre, The Forrest, Chestnut Street Opera House, and the Academy of Music are a few of the theaters that were part of the growth of the popular entertainment industry.

Businessmen associated with this period are exemplified by the management team of Nixon & Zimmerman, who were involved with many of the major performing arts houses in the United States, including Apollo Theatre in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Ford’s Theatre in Baltimore, Maryland; Columbia Theatre in Washington, D.C. Lyceum Theatre in New York, New York; Broad Street Theatre, Chestnut Street Theatre, Garrick Theatre, the Lyric, Grand Opera House, and Metropolitan Opera House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Thomas M. Love, who worked with Nixon & Zimmerman at the Forrest Theatre, was a well-known business manager and was also involved in the escalation of popular entertainment.

Samuel F. (Nirdlinger) Nixon was a major figure in the development of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American theatrical history. Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where his father and uncle were clothiers, Sammy Nirdlinger began working in show business at an early age. He later became known as Samuel F. Nixon. His business partner was J. Fred Zimmerman.

J. Fred Zimmerman, who had been the treasurer of the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., and the Olympic Theatre in New York, was a well-known advance agent in the business. He and Samuel F. Nixon created a thriving theatrical business in the nineteenth century. After the demise of the Theatrical Syndicate, Zimmerman organized and managed the Orpheum Players. By 1922 when it was clear that they could not compete with their rival the Mae
Desmond Players, they folded. During this time Zimmerman also owned Philadelphia’s Keystone, Liberty, and Fairmount Theatres. In 1924 he retired from the theatrical business.

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**Scope and Content Note**

The Philadelphia Theatrical Papers, spanning the dates of 1877–1943 (bulk dates 1890s–1920s), contains correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, advertisements, programs, playbills, financial documents, ledgers, obituaries, postcards, contracts, broadsides, scrapbooks, and telegrams. The papers cover a particularly important period in the theatrical history of America. During this time the rise and fall of monopolistic management and production agencies as well as the expansion of touring companies were impetuses for the success of theatrical businesses such as Nixon & Zimmerman. A majority of the papers in the collection are about their company, which was a successful innovator in Philadelphia, the region, and the country in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Although the focus is Philadelphia, the papers include numerous documents and printed material about the business of theater throughout the United States. It is not known who collected or compiled this material.

The collection, which is housed in three boxes, is arranged in three series. Series I is Theatrical Management and Theaters, 1877-1920, which includes documents about the Forrest Theatre, the theatrical manager Thomas M. Love, the partnership of Nixon and Zimmerman, expenses from various theatrical companies that are listed in a Record Book, and the Walnut Street Theatre. Series II is Programs, which covers the years 1877-1943, and includes memorabilia about the Broad Street Theatre (from 1907-1921), the Metropolitan Opera House (from 1913-1916), and a Miscellaneous file. Series III is Scrapbooks, two volumes that cover the years 1897-1914.

Philadelphia Theatrical Papers is filled with correspondence on stationery with striking letterheads and logos of the various theatrical agencies, companies, and performing arts houses. For example, Nixon & Zimmerman had numerous letterheads for different theatres that they managed. Examples can be found in Box 1, Folder 7 where Nixon & Zimmerman’s names appeared on a variety of stationery. Several kinds of letterhead—from simple to fancy—represent a hotel, theatrical agencies, a touring company, and an opera company (Box 1, Folder 2-3). Box 1, folder 17 contains letterhead with the large and colorful logo for the famous cartoon characters known as the Katzenjammer Kids.

The collection has the correspondence and financial papers of some of the major businessmen in theatrical management during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beside Nixon & Zimmerman, familiar names in this business arena were the Nirdlingers, the Frohmans, and the Shuberts. Numerous actors and actresses as well behind-the-scenes personalities are found too: Otis Skinner, Sarah Bernhardt, Robert Downing, Ethel Barrymore, Eddie Foy, George M. Cohan, F. Ziegfeld, Jr., Enrico Caruso, and Boris Karloff are but a few mentioned in the papers.

The advertisements and programs for musicals, operas, plays, and revues are a rich part of the collection too. The following productions exemplify the diversity of entertainment at the time: “Trial by Jury,” “The Mikado,” “The Pirates of Penzance,” “Aida,” Ziegfeld Follies,” “The Talk of New York,” “The American Idea,” “Rigoletto,” and “The Merry Widow.” Many of these productions began in New York City, and then traveled throughout the country with Philadelphia as a key location along the road.

The scrapbooks are filled with clippings from theatrical programs. They represent the increase in popular theater and the wealth of entertainment that was found in Center City Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century.

**Related Collection:**

Ms 431  *Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger Scrapbook*

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**Series List**

I.  Theatrical Management and Theaters, 1877-1920
   A.  Forrest Theatre, 1908
   B.  Thomas M. Love, 1892-1928
   C.  Nixon and Zimmerman, 1877-1915
   D.  Record Book, 1894-1899
   E.  Walnut Street Theatre, 1982-1920

II. Programs, 1877-1943
   A.  Broad Street Theatre, 1907-1921
   B.  Metropolitan Opera House, 1913-1916
   C.  Miscellaneous Broadsides, and Other Printed Materials, 1877-1943
III. Scrapbooks, 1897-1914

Contents List

Box -- Folder -- Contents

I. Theatrical Management and Theaters, 1877-1920

I. A. Forrest Theatre, 1908

F1 Forrest Theatre, 1908 (some with n.d.)
Contains correspondence and a postcard, which opens up into an announcement for the musical “Have a Heart” with music by Jerome Kern.

I. B. Thomas M. Love, 1892-1928

F2 Documents, 1898-1928
Contains correspondence, announcements, an invitation, and postcards. Content includes a memorandum from Lyman H. Howe’s Moving Pictures; a letter from The American Musician and Art Journal; a letter from the Committee on Public Information’s Division of Films; and a letter from the Publicity Department of Mr. Oscar Hammerstein’s “Naughty Marietta,” Apollo Theatre in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

I. C. Nixon & Zimmerman, 1877-1915

F3 Correspondence, 1892-1893

F4 Correspondence, 1896
Contains letters between James F. Dean, Harris Academy, Baltimore, Maryland, and Nixon & Zimmerman; dated from January 5-April 16, 1896.

F5 Correspondence, 1894-1897

F6 Documents, 1897-1899
Contains correspondence, blank checks, and a program.

F7 Financial Documents, 1901-1903
Contains contracts for productions at different theatres in Philadelphia; also includes a bill of sale.

F8 Correspondence, 1906-1907
Content includes two letters from “The Great Herrman,” who was billed as the “World’s Greatest Hypnotic Expert,” with an elaborate letterhead, which includes a photograph of Herrman with the devil on his shoulder, dated October 20, 1906, Wilmington, Delaware; and a letter about the “Great German Dialect Comedian, Al. H. (Metz) Wilson, dated February 14, 1907, with a photograph of the entertainer.

F9 Documents, 1907
Contains correspondence and a photograph; content includes several large letterheads, some in more than one color.

F10 Correspondence, 1908

F11 Correspondence, 1899-ca. 1920s
Contains letters, a photograph, and a ledger; the black-and-white photograph shows the front of “Nixon’s Apollo” Theatre with advertisement for “Ziegfeld Follies” with F. Ziegfeld, Jr. and Joseph Urban of Vienna (scenic artist for the follies) standing by a large poster about the Follies. Also included is a ledger for the Orpheum Players (Orpheum Theatre), Chestnut Street Opera House, Empire Theatre, Walnut Street Theatre, and American Theatre.

F12 Correspondence, 1877-ca. 1910
Contains letters, a broadside, business card, a
I. D. Record Book, 1894-1899  
F13 Financial records for various theatrical companies

I. E. Walnut Street Theatre, 1892-1920  
F14 Broadsides and Correspondence, 1892-1919

F15 Financial Documents, 1903-1914  
Contains contracts, ledgers, and other financial documents

F16 Contracts, 1918-1920

F17 Documents, 1919-1920  
Contains correspondence, advertisements, photocopy of magazine article, and a mock-up for an advertisement; contains correspondence with letterhead that advertises Robert Downing in a revival of “Ten Nights in a Bar”; and a letterhead advertising “the World’s Famous Minstrel Organization, Gus Hill’s Minstrels.” Also contains a letter with a large letterhead that advertises “The Original Katzenjammer Kids” along with a mock-up of an advertisement for a 3:00 p.m. children’s matinee for their “big fun show.”

II. Programs, 1907-1921  
Contains a small variety of broadsides, leaflets, and playbills from productions.

II. A. Broad Street Theatre, 1907-1921

F18 Plays and Players, 1918  
Contains two copies of playbills from the week of January 7 and January 14, 1918, with Samuel F. Nixon as managing director and Frank Nirdlinger as business manager of the Broad Street Theatre.

F19 Various Programs, ca. 1921  
Contains one copy of the December 5, 1921, issue of Plays and Players about “Blood and Sand,” a play with Otis Skinner, as well as a broadside about this play and actor; the same broadside announces the play “Declasse” with Ethel Barrymore. There is a small leaflet about Barrymore and the play. Other leaflets included are about Ruth Chatterton in “Come Out of the Kitchen,” and two copies of the play “Hamilton” with George Arliss.

F20 Two Programs, 1907-1918
Contains Plays and Players from February 11, 1918, and a copy of The Savoy, dated May 16, 17, and 18, 1907.

F21 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1912-1913 Season  
Includes “Manon” and “Lohengrin”

F22 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1912-1913 Season  
Includes “La Traviata” and “Tosca”

F23 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1912-1913 Season  
Includes “Die Walkuere” and “La Boheme”

F24 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1912-1913 Season  
Includes “The Jewels of the Madonna” and “Le Ranz des Vaches”

F25 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1912-1913 Season  
Includes “Il Barbiere di Siviglia” and “The Huguenots”

F26 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1913-1914 Season  
Includes “Manon” and “Alida”

F27 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1913-1914 Season  
Includes “Faust” and “Don Giovanni”

F28 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1913-1914
Season Includes “Hamlet” and “Rigoletto”
II. A. Broad Street Theatre, 1907-1921 (cont’d)

2  F29 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1913-1914 Season Includes “Madeleine, “Pagliacci,” and “Andrea Chenier”

F30 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1913-1914 Season Includes “Madame Butterfly” and “Andrea Chenier”

F31 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1916-1917 Season Includes “Prince Igor” and “Samson et Dalila”

F32 Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia, 1916-1917 Season Includes “Lohengrin” and “Il Trovatore”

Series II. C. Miscellaneous Broadsides, Programs, and Other Printed Material, 1877-1943

3 F33 Printed Material, 1881-1921 Includes a small brochure about the by-laws of the Theatrical Managers Association, Philadelphia; a program for the American Theatre, dated September 18, 1911; a program from the Arch St. Opera House about a production of “Patience”; a program from the Astor Theatre; two Smileage book coupons, which gave soldiers free admittance to theatrical productions that came to National Army and National Guard camps; a program from the Forrest Theatre advertising “The Broadway Whirl of 1921”; a program from the George Theatre; and four broadsides from the Girard Avenue Theatre.

F34 Printed Material, 1877-1943 Includes a program about the comedy “Arsenic and Old Lace,” with Boris Karloff, which ran at the Locust Street Theatre on September 20, 1943; a program from The Grand Opera House, dated October 17, 1910; a broadside from the Imperial Theatre, dated July 8, 1915; a small envelope from the Lyric Theatre, which listed Sam S. and Lee Shubert as managers; a program from the Mammoth Theatre; an advertisement about picture shows held at the Mammoth Theatre; a broadside advertising “Hamlet” at the Museum Theatre; a card advertising Audrey Munson in “Purity,” which was held at the Poplar Theatre; and two programs about concerts, which were held at the Philadelphia Musical Academy and Willow Grove Park.

III. Scrapbooks, 1897-1914
There are two scrapbooks, which are filled with program clippings about theater at the end of the nineteenth and into the second decades of the twentieth century. One is an unbound scrapbook, which includes clippings from theatrical programs in Philadelphia and other locations in the United States, dated 1904-1910. The other one is a green-bound scrapbook that also contains clippings from theatrical programs; most are from center-city Philadelphia, but some are from other locations. There are occasional handwritten comments on the clippings, and there are some loose items. The programs cover opera, plays, musicals, concerts, and revues. For example, the green-bound scrapbook has a clipping from a production of George M. Cohan’s musical play, “The Yankee Prince,” which was held at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles, California between November 22 and November 27, 1999. Also Enrico Caruso sang in “La Boheme” on December 3, 1912 at the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York City.