Sheldon Keller Collection

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Writers Guild Foundation Archive
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2018
Descriptive Summary
Title: Sheldon Keller Collection
Dates: 1939, 1960-2004
Collection Number: WGF-MS-016
Creator/Collector: Keller, Sheldon, 1923-2008
Extent: 6.4 Linear feet
Repository: Writers Guild Foundation Archive
Los Angeles, California 90048
Abstract: The Sheldon Keller Collection, 1939, 1960-2004 consists of scripts from television, variety specials, and films, as well as correspondence and other materials related to Sheldon Keller's writing career. Several scripts feature sketches, jokes and speeches that Keller wrote for entertainers such as Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, and Sophia Loren. Various items are collaborations with other writers, including Larry Gelbart and Howard Albrecht.
Language of Material: English
Access
Majority of materials stored off site. One week advance notice required for retrieval.
Publication Rights
The responsibility to secure copyright and publication permission rests with the researcher.
Preferred Citation
Sheldon Keller Collection. Writers Guild Foundation Archive
Acquisition Information
Donated January 13, 2014 by Sheldon Keller's son, Casey Keller.
Biography/Administrative History
Sheldon Bernard Keller, who was always called Shelly, was born in Chicago on Aug. 20, 1923. His parents, immigrants from Poland, had built a successful business in Chicago making and selling corsets. Attending the University of Illinois, Keller teamed up with a fraternity brother, Allan Sherman, to put on comic shows. Sherman, who went on to create the game show “I’ve Got a Secret,” also became known for his albums of Yiddish-inflected song parodies. World War II interrupted Keller’s studies. Stationed in the Pacific with the Army Signal Corps, he helped entertain the troops with an Army buddy, Carl Reiner. At the war’s end, Keller married his wife, Bernice Berkowitz, known as “Bitsy” (whom he later divorced), and had two children, Casey and Jamie. Keller went dutifully into the family business after the war, but soon realized that a life in corsets was not for him. Borrowing $500 from his in-laws, he moved to New York to try his hand at television. He found success in 1955 when he joined the renowned writing staff that worked on Sid Caesar’s television show, a spinoff of the popular program, Your Show of Shows. On Caesar’s Hour, the hour long show that ran on NBC from 1954 to 1957, Keller was among a group of writers whose ranks at various times included Mel Brooks, Larry Gelbart, Aaron Ruben, Michael Stewart, Gary Belkin, Mel Tolkin, Selma Diamond and Danny and Neil Simon. Keller shared three Emmy nominations for best comedy writing during his time on Caesar’s Hour. In the 1960s, Keller was head writer on The Danny Kaye Show. He was also a writer on the 1965 TV special, Frank Sinatra: A Man and His Music and specials starring Sophia Loren and Carol Channing. For the 1966 special, An Evening With Carol Channing, Keller shared an Emmy for outstanding writing achievement in variety. In addition to writing episodes of TV series such as Make Room for Daddy, The Dick Van Dyke Show and M.A.S.H., Keller co-wrote the 1968 comedy film Buona Sera, Mrs. Campbell and was a writer on the 1973 action movie Cleopatra Jones. Teamed with Gelbart, he co-wrote Movie, Movie, a 1978 satire of the old Hollywood double bills, which earned them the Writers Guild of America award for best comedy written directly for the screen. As a producer, his credits included The Jonathan Winters Show in the late ’60s, three years of Bob Hope TV specials and House Calls, the 1979-82 CBS sitcom. In the late 1980s and afterward Keller, with Howard Albrecht and other writers, published newsletters of jokes, among them “Funny Stuff From the Gags Gang.” Geared toward radio DJs, the newsletters were also read by toastmasters, politicians and anyone else who might need a joke at a moment’s notice. Keller was also a musician. In 1976, Keller, who played guitar and bass, joined banjo-playing actor George Segal and trombone-playing actor Conrad Janis in performing on Dinah Shore’s TV talk show to promote the Segal and Goldie Hawn movie, The Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox, in which Janis also had a major role. Keller, Segal, and Janis began meeting in Keller’s Nichols Canyon home for Tuesday evening jam sessions, forming a group that Keller dubbed “Beverly Hills Unlisted Jazz Band.” Amateur and professional musicians would show up, including actors Jack Lemmon on piano and Hal Linden on clarinet. An appearance on The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson led to the band’s performing at Carnegie Hall as the opening act for Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. Over the years, the Beverly Hills Unlisted Jazz Band performed its Dixieland and swing music at...
hundreds of jazz festivals, as well as on talk shows, two PBS specials and in the 1986 movie, Nothing in Common. On September 1, 2008, Keller died of complications from Alzheimer's disease at his home in Valencia, northwest of Los Angeles. He is survived by his son Casey Keller, also a screenwriter, and a daughter, Jamie Keller.

**Scope and Content of Collection**

The Sheldon Keller Collection, 1939, 1960-2004 is divided into two series. Series I consists of mostly scripts with any related materials dating from 1939-1993. The series is divided into Subseries A: Television, 1960-1983; Subseries B: MOWs, Specials, TV Movies, 1960-1993; and Subseries C: Films, 1939, 1972-1977. Many of the scripts in the collection are in various draft stages. Some items are also accompanied with development or production material, and handwritten notes. The collection also includes unproduced work. Highlights in Subseries A include scripts from The Dick Van Dyke Show, The Engelbert Humperdinck Show, and Ensign O'Toole. Highlights from Subseries B include scripts from various TV specials and movies, including those that feature Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, and Sophia Loren. Highlights in Subseries C include screenplays such as Cleopatra Jones (1973) and Movie, Movie (1978). Series II consists of correspondence and other materials dating from 1965-2004. It is also divided into Subseries A: Correspondence and Other Papers, 1968-1981; Subseries B: Speeches, 1965-1969; Subseries C: Programs, 1958-1964; Subseries D: Newsletters, 1988-2004; and Subseries E: Miscellaneous Materials, 1967-1978. Highlights in Subseries A include correspondence regarding speeches written for Frank Sinatra and a personal note from Estelle Reiner to Sheldon Keller. Subseries B contains drafts of speeches written for Frank Sinatra at various events. Subseries C consists of programs from various award shows and a live showing for Vacation Playhouse, a summer replacement series that broadcast unsold pilots. Subseries D solely consists of the newsletter, Funny Stuff from the Gags Gang, newsletters of jokes that were geared toward radio D.J.s or anyone else who needed a joke at a moment’s notice. Lastly, Subseries E consists of miscellaneous materials, some of which relate to Sheldon Keller’s work. Highlights include National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Certificate awarded to Sheldon Keller for his contribution to The Tribute to Jimmy Durante and notes for a Writers Guild Newsreel intended for a Writers Guild Awards Dinner written with Larry Gelbart.

**Indexing Terms**

Emmy Awards  
Television specials  
Television scripts  
Television producers and directors  
Television writers