Alfred Lewis and Helen Levitt Papers

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2019
Descriptive Summary
Title: Alfred Lewis and Helen Levitt Papers
Dates: 1948-1995
Collection Number: WGF-MS-103
Creator/Collector:
Extent: 23.75 linear feet or 19 record cartons
Repository: Writers Guild Foundation Archive Los Angeles, California 90048
Abstract: The Al and Helen Levitt Papers consist of much of their creative work written over their lives as writers in the entertainment industry. The collection also includes extensive records from their work on the board and committees of the Writers Guild of America, especially dealing with pension payments to blacklisted writers.
Language of Material: English
Access
Open for research, available by appointment only.
Publication Rights
The responsibility to secure copyright and publication permission rests with the researcher.
Preferred Citation
Alfred Lewis and Helen Levitt Papers. Writers Guild Foundation Archive
Acquisition Information
Biography/Administrative History
Alfred Lewis Levitt was a screenwriter who was blacklisted during the 1950s for his involvement with the Communist Party. Born June 3, 1916 in the Bronx, New York, he began his writing career as the sports editor for the school paper at New York University’s Bronx campus. He joined several political groups as a student, including the Young Communist League in 1932. Levitt married Helen Slote in 1938 and moved to Hollywood to work as a script reader in 1939. He was drafted during WWII in 1942 and was stationed for a time at Fort Roach with the First Motion Picture Unit. He was sent to England in 1944. At the end of the war Levitt was sent to France where he met and worked with Henri Cartier-Bresson, already a famous photographer, who was making a film about the repatriation of prisoners of war and concentration camp survivors. Levitt helped write the narration for the film “Reunion” (“Le Retour” in French) and later said he used the film to help get writing work in Hollywood. His first movie credit was “The Boy With Green Hair” in 1948. He shared credit with Betsy Beaton (story) and Ben Barzman (screenplay). Levitt was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee but was not charged with any crime. His hearing was in Los Angeles in September 1951, where he took the Fifth Amendment instead of acknowledging his Communist ties. He brought a statement to read, but he was not allowed to do so. In it he defended the right to freedom of speech and expression of individual conscience. Soon after his own hearing, Levitt got calls from several Hollywood colleagues who had been subpoenaed. They asked him for help, and he wrote a speech for them to deliver at their hearings. He never revealed their names. The hearing damaged his career and he had trouble finding work. He wrote for television using a front, Jerry Davis, and an assumed name, Tom August. In the late 1950s, August and Davis worked as a writing team on shows such as Bachelor Father and the Donna Reed Show. During this period, Helen Levitt learned to write for television and she assumed the name Helen August. Al and Helen August wrote many TV episodes as a team during the 1960s and 1970s, including The Brady Bunch, That Girl, My Living Doll, and All in the Family as well as several Disney movies. In the 1960s and 1970s, Al Levitt taught dramatic writing classes at several schools, including Cal State Northridge, AFI and Sherwood Oaks Experimental College (with Helen). Levitt was very active in the Writers Guild of America during the 1970s and 1980s. He served on the Guild’s board from 1981-1984 and 1989-1991 and was Secretary-Treasurer from 1985-1989. He was also active in a number of committees and activities, including revising the screen and television credits manuals, arbitrations, and MBA negotiations. The Levitts led the effort in the 1980s to supplement the pensions of blacklisted writers. Stemming from this effort, during the 1990s, the WGA restored film credits to dozens of blacklisted writers. In 1995, the Writers Guild of America West honored the Levitts for work with its Morgan Cox Award, given for service to the Guild. By then the WGA had restored accurate screen credits to 82 films, including those of the Levitts. Al died November 16, 2002 in Los Angeles of heart failure, at age 87. He was survived by son Tom, daughter Ann, two grandchildren and a brother. Helen Slote Levitt was born on December 6, 1916 in Brooklyn. She majored in English at Brooklyn College and became politically active during this period. She married Al Levitt on April 2, 1938 and by the next year they moved to Los Angeles where Al found work. In addition to serving as John Garfield’ s secretary, Helen
was involved in the Communist Party and helped found the Actor’s Lab in 1941, where she worked until AI returned from war in 1945. They had two children after the war, Thomas and Annie. In 1951, after Taking the Fifth Amendment before HUAC, AI was blacklisted from working in Hollywood. Helen eventually learned to write for TV and adopted the pseudonym Helen August. She and AI shared television credits on many TV shows. Careful to disguise themselves during the anti-communist 1950s, the Levitts later learned that many celebrities, including Donna Reed, knew their identity and kept them working. She died of cancer on April 3, 1993 in Encino, CA at age 76. At the time of her death, Levitt chaired a committee for the USC School of Film and Television to memorialize blacklist-era writers. (Information adapted from Los Angeles Times obituaries)

Scope and Content of Collection

The Levitt Papers are organized into three main series. Series I: Creative Work, 1950-1986, consists of much of the output of the Levitts during the 1950s-1970s. Subseries A: Television contains many of the scripts that the Levitts wrote using their pseudonyms as Tom and Helen August and also scripts written with collaborator and one-time front Jerry Davis. TV Show titles include episodes of Bewitched, The Bionic Woman, Bracken’s World, The Brady Bunch, Cannonball, The Jean Arthur Show, My Living Doll, Salty and That Girl. In addition to scripts, most of shows represented in the collection include multiple outlines and correspondence. This subseries includes a short show bible for The Bionic Woman as well as writers’ guides for The Jean Arthur Show and ABC Afterschool Specials. This subseries contains many scripts written by other people, including episodes of House Calls, Maude, McCloud and Quincy M.E., presumably used by the Levitts in order to aid in creating and formatting their own ideas. The subseries also contains ideas for episodes of The Ann Sothern Show, Battlesharp Galactica, The Cop and the Kid, Paradise Hotel and Rosetti and Ryan, which never got made. In addition, the subseries includes original ideas such as a Merlin Jones television series for Disney, Street Scenes (a mini-series about the Boston Massacre) and Wilde Oscar (a sitcom about an Italian family that owns a Chinese restaurant). Subseries B: Feature Films consists of feature screenplays written by the Levitts, both produced and unproduced. Produced titles in the collection include The Boy with the Green Hair (1948), The Misadventures of Merlin Jones (1964) and The Monkey’s Uncle (1965). Unproduced projects include The Real Thing, Timothy Oaks, Oddball Express and Pentacle. In the early 1970s, Al Levitt collaborated with Oscar-winning and blacklisted screenwriter Michael Wilson on a screenplay called Johnny Handsome adapted from the novel by John Godney. The film was never produced, but this subseries contains the writers’ research and 4 drafts of the script. The Levitts worked over many years on a feature adaptation of the Guy de Maupassant short story Boule De Suif. Multiple drafts are included as are several versions of AI’s English translation of the French story. The Levitts also worked for a number of years on a feature film inspired by AI’s work at Fort Roach titled “Fort Hollywood.” The collection contains many outline drafts and notes for the project. Subseries C: Plays and Novels contain drafts of a variety of titles including drafts of AI’s novel Girl in a Dream World as well as Snowball – an attempt to adapt Boule de Sulf as a play. Notably, the collection contains a one-act play AI wrote about Communism and the Blacklist era titled “Three Reds” which takes a direct look at McCarthyism and HUAC. Series II: WGA Records, 1970-1995 contains extensive records from the WGA board and committees that Al and Helen were members of. Subseries A, Board is comprised of board meeting minutes, agendas and information packets from when Al served on the Executive Board from 1981-1991 and financial reports from his time as Secretary-Treasurer. Subseries B, Committees is comprised of committee agendas, minutes and notes from committees that the Levitts served on: Academic Liaison, Arbitrations, Basic Cable, BBS (Bulletin Board System), Blacklisted Writers Screening Committee, Communication Structure, CPR Save a Life, East-West Structure, Freelance Writers, International Affiliation of Writers Guilds, Membership/Finance, Negotiating, Nominating, Older Writers/Volunteer Services to Older Writers, Pension and Health Plan, Picket Line First Aid, Residuals, Screen and TV Credits Review, Strike Planning, Strike Fund, Writers Recognition. In addition to committee records, the subseries contains interfiled subject files that cover topics of relevance to the Guild and the Levitts including copyright, diversity initiatives and reports, a dues increase, National Council meetings, a Soviet Writers film festival, the employment of several Executive Directors and the strikes of 1981, 1985 and 1988. Most of the WGA files contain official meeting minutes and agendas, correspondence and Al and Helen’s notes about the matters at hand. Particularly valuable are the files that reference Items of ongoing business in the Guild which Al and/or Helen were heavily involved, such as negotiations and strikes during the 1980s, revising credits process manuals, arbitrations, and the blacklisted writers pension supplement process. The pension files contain correspondence and recollections from blacklisted writers and/or spouses regarding involvement in a variety of films. Writers include Paul Jarrico, Michael Wilson, Alvah Bessie, Bernard Gordon, Julian Zimet, Maurice Rapt, Sheridan Gibney, Louis Pollock, Arnaud D’Usseau, Arthur Strawn, Edward Chodorov, and William Robson. Series III: Personal and Professional Papers, 1941-1990 is organized by subject and does not pertain to a specific creative project or WGA committee. This series includes: biographical material and resumes; Al’s written script coverage when he worked as a studio reader in the 1940s; a WWII film script he wrote while serving in the First Motion Picture Unit; English and French versions of the script for Le Retour; Al and Helen’s academic employment and teaching material (including a lengthy guide on how to write); correspondence with King Brothers regarding getting into the television business; Al and Helen’s compiled research and reflections on the Blacklist period spanning the 1970s through the 1990s; and Al’s eulogies for deceased writers including Alfred Lewis and Helen Levitt
Papers
WGF-MS-103
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Ben Barzman, Waldo Salt and Albert Maltz.

**Indexing Terms**
Blacklisting of authors--United States.
Blacklisting of entertainers--United States.
Writers Guild of America, West
King Bros. Productions
Television scripts.
Screenplays.
Television writers.
Screenwriters.