
Mel Tolkin Papers

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Writers Guild Foundation Archive

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Mel Tolkin Papers

Dates: 1932-1997

Collection Number: WGF-MS-015

Creator/Collector: Tolkin, Mel, 1913-2007

Extent: 11.4 linear feet

Repository: Writers Guild Foundation Archive
Los Angeles, California 90048

Abstract: The Mel Tolkin Papers, 1932-1997, consist of scripts, sketches, development materials, production notes, correspondence, playbills, clippings, and other material related to his work as a comedy and variety writer for stage and television. The bulk of the collection consists of material from Your Show of Shows, Caesar's Hour and All In the Family.

Language of Material: English

Access

Available by appointment only.

Publication Rights

The responsibility to secure copyright and publication permission rests with the researcher.

Preferred Citation

Mel Tolkin Papers. Writers Guild Foundation Archive

Acquisition Information

Donated by Mel Tolkin, July 22, 1998.

Biography/Administrative History

Mel Tolkin was born Shmuel Tolchinsky in a village outside of Odessa, Ukraine on August 3, 1913. His family emigrated to Montreal, Canada in 1926 and he became known as Samuel. After high school, with his parents' encouragement, he began studying accounting. Without their permission, he began composing musical numbers for local revues under the pseudonym Mel Tolkin. He served in the Canadian Army Band during World War II and upon completing service in 1945, moved to New York City and married Edith Liebovitch. Tolkin teamed with writing partner Lucille Kallen whom he worked with for several years. Their partnership began while writing weekly revues for Camp Tamiment, a summer resort in the Pocono Mountains that hosted many famous guests, performers and writers including Danny Kaye, Woody Allen and Neil Simon. Realizing the potential of the new medium of television, Tamiment producer Max Liebman created a weekly variety television show around Tamiment performers Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca and hired Tolkin and Kallen to be the head writers. The Admiral Broadway Revue aired on NBC from January to June 1949 but was cancelled that year due to sponsorship conflicts. Using the same writers and performers, Liebman then created Your Show of Shows, a weekly variety show that premiered in 1950. Tolkin and Kallen were the head writers and later managed a staff that grew to include Mel Brooks, Tony Webster and brothers Neil and Danny Simon. The television series The Dick Van Dyke Show and the Neil Simon play, "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" are based on Tolkin and the writing team during this period. When Your Show of Shows ended in 1954, Tolkin became the head writer for Sid Caesar's new variety show, Caesar's Hour, which ran from 1954-1957 and garnered several Emmy nominations for Tolkin. The writing staff included Mel Brooks, Sheldon Keller, Larry Gelbart. According to Tolkin's notes in the collection, Woody Allen also wrote on the show but he is not credited. When the crew of Your Show of Shows reunited in 1967 for a special, Tolkin and his team won an Emmy for writing in a variety program. During the 1950s and 1960s, Tolkin wrote on several comedy and variety shows and for performers such as Danny Kaye and Bob Hope. Between 1975 and 1979, he was a writer on the sitcom All In The Family, winning a Humanitas Prize and a WGA Award in 1978 as well as garnering an Emmy nomination for his work on the series. After the series ended, he worked on a few sitcoms and taught comedy writing at UCLA Extension, winning 1987 Writing Teacher of the Year. Tolkin died on November 26, 2007 at the age of 94 and was survived by his wife and sons Michael and Stephen, both screenwriters.

Scope and Content of Collection

Series I: Scripts, 1949-1980, consists of scripts and sketches from Mel Tolkin's comedy and variety writing career. Subseries A: Weekly Television Scripts contains scripts from episodic television shows running from 1949-1980, chiefly Your Show of Shows, Caesar's Hour and All in the Family. Others include The Admiral Broadway Revue, Sid Caesar Invites You, and Sanford. Subseries B: Specials and MOWs, 1959-1966, consists of scripts for television specials and movies sponsored by a variety of companies including Rexall, Pontiac, Revlon and U.S. Steel. The series includes the script for The Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner, Howard Morris Special reunion show that aired in 1967 and won an Emmy Award for Best

Writing for a Variety Program. Also included is the script and rundown for the 200th episode of All In the Family, a retrospective hosted by Norman Lear showcasing stories and favorite moments from the show. Subseries C: The Bob Hope Show Materials, 1970-1974, consists of speeches and monologue jokes that Mel Tolkin and Lester White wrote for The Bob Hope Show and Hope's public appearances during the early 1970s. Series II: Development Materials, 1966-1978, contains story meeting notes and development materials from Tolkin's time as a staff writer on All In The Family. It also contains Mel Tolkin's pitch and contract for the 1967 Caesar/Coca reunion special Sid Caesar Revisited. Series III: Correspondence, Clippings and Notes, 1932-1997, consists of Tolkin's correspondence and files related to people, places and projects in his professional and personal life. Subseries A: Individuals, 1950-1997, contains notes from and about writers and performers he worked with during his career including Imogene Coca, Sid Caesar, Max Liebman, Danny Kaye, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon and Woody Allen. Subseries B: Projects, 1936-1997, contains review clippings, written memories and notes about specific projects or time periods such as the Camp Tamiment revues, Admiral Broadway Revue, and Ten From Your Show of Shows. This series also contains specific notes recounting his history writing for Sid Caesar and notes from his two year stint as a development executive at Universal Studios. Subseries C: General and Personal Files, 1932-1997, contains clippings about some of Tolkin's former colleagues and his thoughts about comedy writing in general. It also contains personal letters from a variety of people including novelist Thomas Berger, actor Carroll O'Connor, writer Rita Mae Brown, Spiro Agnew and others. Finally in this series is Tolkin's unpublished autobiography "Where Did I Go Right?" Series IV: Artifacts, 1946-1973, consists of ephemeral items related to Tolkin's comedy writing career. This includes playbills, programs, and posters from Admiral Broadway Revue, Your Show of Shows, Caesar's Hour, and others. Also in this series is a 45 record with a recording of "Goin' Crazy" co-written by Mel Tolkin and Sid Caesar and a souvenir pen from President Lyndon Johnson's 1965 signing of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act.

Indexing Terms

Variety shows (Television programs)

Golden Age of Television

Television scripts

All in the family (Television program) Caesar's hour (Television program) Your show of shows (Television program)

Television producers and directors

Television writers
