Finding aid for the USC School of Dramatic Arts records 5287

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Abstract: The University of Southern California's School of Dramatic Arts began as the Department of Drama within the School of Speech in 1945. It was part of several other departments before it became an independent school in 1990. The records in the collection document many of the activities of the School in the second half of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st century. Included are programs and photographs from theatrical productions, photographs and documents from events including commencement and the department’s annual awards ceremony, issues of the school’s newsletter, letters from alumni, promotional materials for the school, and press clippings about faculty, alumni, and students.

Historical Note
The USC School of Dramatic Arts is one of the top-ranked dramatic arts schools in the world and counts among its alumni many notable television and film actors, including John Ritter, Forest Whitaker, Swoosie Kurtz, Ally Sheedy, and LeVar Burton.

Though the study of the dramatic arts began with the establishment of the University of Southern California in 1880, with drama courses offered by the School of Speech, the USC School of Dramatic Arts as an independent entity is one of the youngest schools at the university. The school’s first incarnation was as part of the College of Liberal Arts. The Department of Drama was created in 1945 under the direction of William C. de Mille (the older brother of noted director Cecil B. de Mille). Classes were taught in the Touchstone Theatre of the Old College until 1948, when the building was torn down. The Department of Drama was moved to a building which had previously belonged to the Red Car Line and was christened the Stop Gap Theatre, in part because de Mille regarded the building as a “stop gap” measure until a better building for the theatre was available. In 1949, the department moved out of the theatre and into a five-room house, where they remained until 1966. In addition to the Stop Gap Theatre, the Department of Drama shared the Bovard Auditorium with the College of Music for performances. In 1950, the department was renamed the Division of Drama and moved under the jurisdiction of the Division of Communications, which also included the departments of Cinema, Journalism, Speech, and Telecommunications.

When de Mille retired in 1953, Dr. James Butler, a former student of de Mille’s and faculty member of the department, served as chair. Butler founded the Experimental Theatre Workshop, a program which has continued to this day, as well as expanded the school’s course offerings and number of theatrical productions.

In 1966, the Department of Drama was moved to new, larger headquarters that allowed the entire department to be housed together. The same year, USC created the School of Performing Arts, which included the Division of Drama, the Division of Cinema, and the School of Music. Raymond Kendall, former Dean of the School of Music, became the first Dean of this new school.

Also in 1966, faculty member Professor John E. Blankenship created Festival Theatre USC-USA, a theatrical troupe of students and faculty which performed productions at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival for 21 seasons between 1966 and 2001, putting the USC theatre program on the international map.

Grant Beglarian came on as Dean of the School of Performing Arts in 1969 and director Alex Segal became Chair of the Division of Drama in 1970. While chair, Segal oversaw the development of the Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts degree programs as well as the building of the Bing Theatre, which opened in 1976. Bing Theatre was the first and only building to date to be constructed solely for the use of the theatre program. It became the site of all of the school’s mainstage theatrical productions and remains so today. The former Fine Arts studio was turned over to the Division of Drama and turned into its final incarnation as the Greenroom Theatre. In 1977, Segal was succeeded by Distinguished Visiting Professor John Houseman. He was followed as Chair and Artistic Director by W. Duncan Ross in 1979. Ross convinced the university to give the drama department the building used as a communications center during the 1984 Olympic Games. This building, known as the Drama Center, now houses the Dean’s Office, several faculty offices, Academic Services, and the “black box” Massman Theater. Under Ross’s direction, the USC undergraduate drama program rank rose from thirteenth to fifth in the country.

In 1983, Beglarian retired, and after an unsuccessful search for a new dean, the School of Performing Arts was dissolved. The university formed two new schools, the School of Music and the School of Cinema-Television. Drama, a division once
again, was relegated to the latter.

In 1986, Duncan Ross retired due to illness and Richard Toscan, who had joined the drama faculty in 1976, was made Chair of the Division of Drama and Associate Dean of the School of Cinema-Television.

1990 was a year of changes for the Drama program. In the early part of the year, the Department of Dance was absorbed into the Division of Drama, which allowed the school to expand into the Physical Education (PED) Building. The Stop Gap Theatre, which had failed to meet earthquake codes, was demolished. And finally, the Division of Drama finally became an independent school, the USC School of Theatre.

Richard Toscan left USC in 1992. For a year, Dr. Barbara Solomon served as Interim Dean until the appointment of Dr. Robert Scales in 1993. Under Dean Scales, Minor degrees in Dance and Performing Arts were established as part of the school programming. The costume shop, costume storage, and classes were moved into the PED Building and additional office space was secured for faculty and graduate assistants in the Childs Way Two Building (CWT). This period also saw the beginning of a series of visiting Senior Lecturers and several notable new faculty members were added, including Dr. Meiling Cheng and Pulitzer Prize winner Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland.

In 1996, the Greenroom Theatre was destroyed by a fire. To replace it, the Scene Shop was moved into a building closer to the Performing Arts Annex and the old scene shop building was turned into the Scene Dock Theatre, which opened in 1997.

In 2002, Dean Scales retired and Madeline J. Puzo was appointed Dean. Working with the faculty, Dean Puzo, developed a plan to revise the undergraduate curriculum and further grow the graduate programs, including an MFA degree in Dramatic Writing, which began in 2004, and a new MFA Acting program which began in 2006. In 2007, the school held the inaugural MFA Festival of Plays, featuring works by students from the MFA Dramatic Writing program. Dean Puzo brought a continuing stream of Visiting Artists such as Jason Alexander, Twyla Tharp, and Maximilian Schell to teach at the school.

In 2005, the School of Theatre launched two new partnerships. The first, with Los Angeles’ Center Theatre Group, allowed fourteen theatre students to perform with the professional company at the Ahmanson Theatre. The second, with the USC Rossier School of Education, led to the creation of a degree in Applied Theatre Arts with an emphasis on theatre education. The CWT building was given over in its entirety to the School of Theatre, bringing more of the faculty, staff and classrooms together. Puzo also added a Student Design Lab and the Village Gate Theatre to the school’s roster.

In 2012, the USC Board of Trustees formally voted to change the name of the USC School of Theatre to the USC School of Dramatic Arts. The decision was made so that the school’s name described all majors within the program.

Scope and Content
The records of the USC School of Dramatic Arts consist of photographs, slides, programs, clippings, press releases, publications, and printed ephemera that document much of the School's activities from its beginnings in 1945 and into the early part of the 21st century. Included are programs and photographs of many of the school's mainstream and student productions; articles and clippings on some of the School's notable personnel, including John Blankenchip, William White, and Endesha Ida Mae Holland; records of academic activities and events; materials related to the business of the School; School publications and publicity materials; and press clippings and press releases documenting the activities of the School's faculty, alumni, and students.

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**Administration 1988-2007**

Scope and Content

Information about the organization and administration of the School of Dramatic Arts. The records consist of historical information about the school, correspondence, and some materials on the most recent search for a new Dean.

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Box 1, Folder 3  Dean Search Info 2001-2002
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**Alumni 1957-2006**

Scope and Content

Most of the records are correspondence and materials relating to specific alumni. Also included are clippings and promotional materials regarding notable alumni of the School of Dramatic Arts.

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Box 1, Folder 11  Mike Cantor 1971
Box 1, Folder 12  Notable Alumni circa 1990
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Scope and Content

Programs, photographs and planning materials for events held by the School of Dramatic Arts. Includes annual events, such as the Awards Dinner and Commencement; visits by notable individuals such as Twyla Tharp; and memorial services for faculty and alumni of the School.

Scope and Content

This series contains photographs, resumes, press clippings, and correspondence regarding some of the faculty, including Deans, of the School of Dramatic Arts.

Alumni 1957-2006

School of Theatre Tony Award nominees 1965-1987
Whitney Sponsler circa 2006
Yu Feng Huang in Qi Pen: A Mountain undated

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All-School Picnic 1993-1994
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School of Theatre Commencement 1988
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Twyla Tharp 2004
USC Division of Drama 40th Anniversary 1986
US Institute of Theatre Technology conference 2001
William C. White Memorial 1996

Faculty 1980-2006

Margo Apostolos circa 1991
Grant Beglarian circa 1982
John Blankenchip circa 2005
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Endesha Ida Mae Holland 1994-2006
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Eve Roberts 1991
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Scope and Contents

This series is comprised of photographs, slides, and programs from many of the theatrical productions put on by the School of Dramatic Arts. These productions include mainstage plays, student produced plays, and plays by guest directors.

Performance photographs 1949-2005 bulk

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- The American Dream 1964 July
- A Thurber Carnival 1964 August
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- Skin of Our Teeth 1966 March
- The Importance of Being Earnest 1967 March
- The Imaginary Invalid 1968 December
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- This Agony, This Triumph 1970 March
- She Stoops to Conquer 1975 April
- Oklahoma! 1976 April
- Equus 1979 February
- Performances circa 1970s
- The Undiscovered Country 1983
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- Pride and Prejudice circa 1986
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- The Orestia 1987 March
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- Evita 1989 March
- Performances circa 1980s
- The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus 1990 February
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Scope and Content
Clippings and press releases compiled by School of Dramatic Arts personnel, documenting
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Bailey Williams Directed Research Portfolio 1984 May