

Chris Castor:

An Inventory of Her Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Castor, Chris, 1895/6-?
Title:	Chris Castor Papers
Dates:	1876-2004
Extent:	12 document boxes, 11 oversize boxes, 4 oversize folders (osf) (9.85 linear feet)
Abstract:	Chris Castor (1895-6-?) was a British stage, television, and radio actress, and the first wife of Shakespearean actor Sir Donald Wolfit. The Chris Castor Papers (1876-2004) encompass an assortment of materials from artworks to music manuscripts, correspondence, clippings, photographs, programs, and scrapbooks. The papers are arranged in series that reflect the broad variety of creators and collectors of material within the papers as a whole.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00194
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 2008
Processed by:	Ancelyn Krivak, 2009
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketches

Chris Frances Castor (1895/6-?), British stage, radio and television actress, lived in British Guiana as a child. By 1908, she and her family had moved to London, where she would be based for the rest of her life. At a young age, Castor developed an interest in singing and a passion for the opera and took vocal lessons at the London College of Music and later at the Guildhall School of Music. At Guildhall, where she studied from 1917 to 1921, Castor's studies shifted in emphasis to a focus on drama and preparation for a career on the stage. One of Castor's teachers at Guildhall was Shakespearean actress Kate Rorke, with whom she maintained a close relationship over the decades to come.

By 1920, Castor was appearing in small roles on the London stage, and two years later she was touring with the company of Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Castor understudied for Campbell in the 1923 production of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and the two actresses maintained a lifelong friendship. During the 1920s, Castor's career continued to grow, as she won acclaim for supporting roles in London and lead roles in repertory plays that toured the UK. Castor worked with Donald Wolfit in the Sheffield Repertory Company in 1927; in 1928 they were married, and a daughter, Margaret, was born the following year. The family did not stay together long, however, and the marriage ended in divorce in 1934. Castor continued to work on the British stage for the next two decades, including such roles as Lady Macbeth and Mme. Arkadina from Chekhov's *The Seagull*. In the 1950s and 1960s, she also acted in radio and television programs, and appeared in at least one feature film, *No Place for Jennifer* (1950).

Sir Donald Wolfit (1902-1968) was one of the best known Shakespearean actors of the mid-twentieth century British stage. As actor-manager of the Donald Wolfit Shakespeare Company, he worked nearly continuously at Stratford-on-Avon, at the Old Vic in London, and on tour across Great Britain for over three decades. He was particularly acclaimed as Volpone and King Lear, two roles which have been described as "the summit of his art". In addition to his work onstage, Wolfit acted in more than thirty film and television productions, mostly during the 1950s and 1960s, including David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, in which he played a supporting role. Writer Ronald Harwood, who was Wolfit's dresser in the 1950s, drew upon his experiences with Wolfit in his play and film *The Dresser*, the story of an aging Shakespearean actor and his long-suffering assistant. Wolfit was the first actor to be honored twice by the British monarchy, in 1950 as Commander of the British Empire, and in 1957 as Knight Commander.

Margaret Wolfit (1929-2008), daughter of actors Chris Castor and Donald Wolfit, was a well-known actress in her own right, on the stage in the late 1940s and 1950s and film and television programs in the 1960s. She was the director of the Royal Theatrical Fund for 30 years and a trustee of the Wolfit Endowment Fund, which funded theatrical education for aspiring actors from Wolfit's home town of Newark, England.

Mrs. Patrick Campbell (1865-1940) was one of the leading British actresses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a star on Broadway and London's West End. She was particularly well known for her performance as the "woman with a past" in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, the play that made her reputation in 1893, and for originating the role of Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* (1914), a part written for her by her close friend George Bernard Shaw. Campbell (born Beatrice Stella Tanner) eventually developed a reputation for being a demanding diva with a rather wicked tongue, but she had many loyal friends and supporters, including Chris Castor.

Rosabel Watson (1865-?), musician, conductor, and composer, was a graduate of the Guildhall School of Music who founded one of the first professional all-female orchestras, the Aeolian Ladies' Orchestra, in London in the late nineteenth century. She composed and conducted music for Shakespeare plays and other theatrical productions from the 1880s into the 1950s; in the later part of her career she worked extensively with the Donald Wolfitt Shakespeare Company at Stratford-on-Avon and other venues.

Ernst Stern (1876-1954) was a costume and set designer who worked with many theatrical companies including those of Max Reinhardt and, later, Donald Wolfitt.

Sources:

Gillett, Paula. *Musical Women in England, 1870-1914*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Harwood, Ronald. "Wolfitt, Sir Donald (1902-1968)." *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

"Margaret Wolfitt: actress daughter of Sir Donald Wolfitt." *The Times*, October 10, 2008, Obituaries section.

Peters, Margot. *Mrs. Pat*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

Stern, Ernst. *My Life, My Stage*. London: Gollancz, 1951.

Scope and Contents

The Chris Castor Papers (1876-2004) encompass an assortment of materials from artworks to music manuscripts, correspondence, clippings, photographs, programs, and scrapbooks. The papers are arranged in series that reflect the broad variety of creators and collectors of material within the papers as a whole.

Series I., Chris Castor, 1913-1972, is further divided into two subseries, Subseries A. Productions, 1920-1972, undated and Subseries B. Career and Personal, 1913-1968. The Productions subseries contains clippings, contracts, photographs, posters, and programs related to specific theater, film, and television productions, alphabetized by production name. An index of production titles located at the end of this finding aid provides

location information for each production. There are also two scrapbooks that document Castor's production history, one from the Sheffield Repertory Company's 1927 season (in which she acted with soon-to-be husband Donald Wolfit), and one containing clippings from 1919 to 1928. The Personal subseries includes several folders of correspondence, most of it between Castor and Wolfit, as well as numerous photographs, photo albums, and scrapbooks. In addition to portraits of Castor, there are many family photographs, some of them taken in British Guiana, portraits of other actors and actresses, and a collection of cartes-de-visite dating approximately to the 1870s. It is not known whether the subjects of the cartes-de-visite are relatives of Castor; the portraits were taken at various studios, mostly in London. Postcard and photograph albums document Castor's early interest in the opera with clippings and programs from performances she attended at Covent Garden and portrait photographs of opera stars such as Emmy Destinn and Enrico Caruso, some of them autographed. Other photographs depict various non-human subjects, chiefly houses and scenery in British Guiana. Among the more eclectic items in the Chris Castor Papers is a cabinet card photograph of a crocodile presentation box given to Sir Charles Warren by the Worshipful Company of Leathersellers in 1887. The relationship of this photograph to Castor or any of the other people represented elsewhere in the Papers is unknown.

Like Series I., Series II. Sir Donald Wolfit, 1896-1968, is divided into Productions and Career and Personal subseries. Subseries A. Productions, 1928-1968, contains artwork, clippings, and programs related to specific theatrical productions, arranged alphabetically by production title. An index of production titles located at the end of this finding aid provides location information for each production. Among the notable items in this subseries are a prompt book for the 1940 Cambridge Arts Theatre production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, along with correspondence from economist John Maynard Keynes, who financed the production, regarding the play's controversial content (it had at that time not been played in public since the 17th century). Subseries B. Career and Personal, 1896-1966, contains a variety of materials, including Wolfit's OBE medal, clippings, photographs, correspondence with Laurence Olivier and others, grammar school report cards, and an architectural drawing of Wolfit's boyhood home. Also in this subseries is a sculpture of Wolfit in one of his signature roles, Volpone.

Series III. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 1896-1961, contains correspondence between Castor and Campbell, notes written by Castor about Campbell, and Campbell-related items from Castor's collection. Collected materials include photographs, clippings, programs, sculptures of Campbell's hand and of Campbell in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and a synopsis for a proposed play or screenplay written by Campbell, "What Are We to Do About Mother?"

Series IV. Margaret Wolfit, 1948-2004, includes correspondence and photographs, in addition to documentation of the foundation and activities of the Wolfit Endowment Fund.

Series V. Ernst Stern, consists of original artwork that depicts Stern's costume designs for a production of *Macbeth*.

Clippings, correspondence, programs, articles, and notes unrelated to any of the creators represented by other series are in Series VI. Other Materials, 1905-1985.

Series VII. Rosabel Watson, 1892-1950, consists of music manuscripts and sheet music. Music for specific theatrical productions, primarily Shakespeare, is filed at the beginning of the series, alphabetically by production title. Transcriptions of other works, sheet music, and original music composed by Watson for a children's ballet in 1926 are filed after music for productions. Please note that many of these pieces may also have been adapted by Watson for theatrical use, but they are not identified by a specific production title.

An Index of Correspondents, an Index of Photographs and Photographic Postcards, and an Index of Productions are available at the end of this finding aid.

Related Material

Additional material related to Donald Wolfit is located at the Ransom Center in the Donald Wolfit Papers and the John Mayes Family Papers. The James Roose-Evans Papers and the Dame Edith Sitwell Collection contain correspondence with Wolfit, and the Irwin Margulies Collection contains materials related to his casting in *Lawrence of Arabia*. The Joseph Abeles Studio Collection contains a photograph of Wolfit and the B. J. Simmons & Co. Costume Design Records contain costume designs for Wolfit.

Additional material related to Mrs. Patrick Campbell is located in the Literary Files Collection, the Mary Hutchinson Papers, the Al Hirschfeld Collection, the Sinclair Lewis Family Papers Collection, the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, and the Frederick Harold Frith Banbury Papers. The George Bernard Shaw Collection contains over twenty letters of correspondence between Campbell and Shaw.

Additional music manuscripts of Rosabel Watson are located in the Donald Wolfit Papers.

Additional set and costume designs by Ernst Stern are located in the W. H. Crain Collection and the Donald Wolfit Papers.

Index Terms

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Jackson, Barry Vincent, Sir
Keynes, John Maynard
Novello, Ivor
Olivier, Laurence
Redgrove, Peter
Rorke, Kate
Shaw, George Bernard
Thorndike, Dame Sybil
Watson, Rosabel
Wolfit, Donald
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Stern, Ernst
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Document Types

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- *Tamburlaine the Great* [play], program and prompt sheet, undated--6.3
- *The Taming of the Shrew* [play], clippings, 1928--1.4
- *The Terror* [play], clippings, 1922--1.4
- *Tiger Cats* [play], clippings, 1924--1.4, 18.6
- *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* [play], correspondence, lighting and prop notes, prompt book, 1940--6.4
- *Touchwood* [play], clipping, undated--1.4
- *The Truth About Blayds* [play], clipping and photograph, undated--1.4
- *The Unfair Sex* [play], photographs, undated--1.4
- *Volpone* [play], sculpture, Wolfit as Volpone, plaster cast, 48 x 15 cm, undated--19
- *When We Are Married* [play], certificate, poster, and program, 1948--1.4, osf 3
- *The White Assegai* [play], contract, 1930--1.4
- *Widowers' Houses* [play], clipping, undated--1.4
- *The Wild Duck* [play], program, undated--1.4
- *The Wind of Heaven* [play], program, 1946--1.4
- *The Winslow Boy* [play], program, undated--1.4
- *Winter Sunshine* [play], program, 1938--1.4
- *The Witch* [play], contract and photograph, 1944--1.4