Morris Gest:

An Inventory of His Collection in the Performing Arts Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Gest, Morris, 1881-1942
Title:	Morris Gest Collection
Dates:	1864-1966 (bulk 1894-1958)
Extent:	29 document boxes (12.18 linear feet), 3 oversize boxes (osb), 1 oversize file (osf)
Abstract:	The Morris Gest Collection, 1864-1966 (bulk 1894-1958), compiled by Gest's press agents, Oliver Sayler and Marjorie Barkentin, documents the life and career of one of Broadway's most successful and well-known producers of the 1910s and 1920s. Included are materials from his productions of <i>The Miracle</i> , directed by Max Reinhardt and designed by Norman Bel Geddes, and of the Moscow Art Theatre's only performances in the United States. Also present are drafts of Sayler's unpublished biography of Gest, correspondence, photographs, drawings, costume designs, posters, programs, scripts, scrapbooks, business and legal documents, clippings, and notes.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection No. PA-00038
Language:	English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Yiddish
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 1978
Processed by:	Ancelyn Krivak, 2013
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Morris Gest (1881-1942) was one of Broadway's most successful and well-known theatrical producers of the 1910s and 1920s. Born Mishka Gershonovitch on January 17, 1881, in Koshedary, a small village near Vilnius, Lithuania, and raised in the Jewish community of Butrimonys, Lithuania, Gest emigrated to Boston by himself at the age of twelve. Although his family's intention had been for the boy to live with his cousins in Boston, Gest chose to live on his own and support himself through a variety of odd jobs, such as selling newspapers and peddling jewelry on the street. Eventually Gest found his niche in the Yiddish theaters, vaudeville palaces, and carnivals of Boston, where he worked as barker, usher, bill poster, and advertising manager. In 1901, Gest went to work as a promoter at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, and then moved to New York City where he enjoyed great success as a ticket speculator on Broadway. Gest's activities attracted the attention of Oscar Hammerstein I, who hired the young man to find and promote new talent for his vaudeville theater, the Paradise Roof Garden. In 1905, Gest entered into a partnership with producer F. Ray Comstock, who held the lease at the Hippodrome Theatre. While he was working for Hammerstein and producing his own theatrical spectacles with Comstock, Gest became acquainted with Reina Belasco, the daughter of Broadway producer and director David Belasco, and the two married in 1909. After this time, Gest's productions shifted away from vaudeville acts towards increasingly highbrow musicals and plays, although he never lost his taste for visual spectacle and lavish production values. In 1911, he produced Gertrude Hoffman's La Saison Russe, which reproduced the choreography and designs of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo for American audiences for the first time. Gest also produced tours of well-known personalities such as Evelyn Nesbit Thaw and French music-hall actress Polaire. Other Gest productions of the 1910s included Experience (1914), an updated version of the medieval morality play *Everyman*, a Biblical pageant titled *The Wanderer* (1917), the Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton, and P. G. Wodehouse-penned musical Oh, Boy! (1917), Chu Chin Chow (1917), a musical adaptation of the Arabian Nights tales and its sequel, Mecca (1920), and a dramatization of Pierre Louys's novel Aphrodite (1919). Gest also dabbled in motion pictures, providing publicity for opera singer Geraldine Farrar's performance in Cecil B. DeMille's film version of *Carmen* (1915).

In the 1920s, Gest produced another Near Eastern-themed musical extravaganza, *Afgar* (1920), then brought Russian comedian Nikita Balieff's variety show *Chauve-Souris* to Broadway in 1922. The following year Gest imported the Moscow Art Theatre, Russia's foremost theatrical company co-directed by Konstanin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. The company toured America repeatedly in the 1920s, presenting plays by Russian authors such as Anton Chekhov and Ivan Turgenev, as well as classics by other playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and Carlo Goldoni, and later light opera and other musical productions as the Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio. Following the critical success of the Moscow Art Theatre tour, Gest brought another legend of the European stage, Italian actress Eleonora Duse, to America for a brief tour in 1924. Meanwhile, Gest was working on his next blockbuster production, a Christian-themed melodrama called *The Miracle* that was first presented in London in 1911. Directed by Max Reinhardt and designed by Norman Bel Geddes, Gest's

production of *The Miracle* opened at New York's Century Theatre in 1924. *The Miracle* toured the United States for the next three years, and went on tour again from 1929 to 1930, primarily so Gest could make up the losses incurred by Bel Geddes's enormous production costs.

In addition to his professional work in the 1920s, Gest used his money and connections to advance his personal and family interests. In 1922, Gest arranged for the removal of his parents from what was then the Soviet Union, and negotiated a safe passage for them to a new home in Germany. He toured Europe several times during the decade, meeting with poet Gabriele D'Annunzio and Benito Mussolini in Italy, and enjoying the company of various aristocrats in Britain. Between 1928 and 1929, Gest used his British connections to bring the Stratford-upon-Avon Festival Company to the United States and Canada for a multi-city tour. Gest also imported the Austrian actor Alexander Moissi, known for his work with Max Reinhardt, to Broadway in a production of Tolstoy's play

Redemption (also known as The Living Corpse) in 1929. Also in 1929, Gest produced and handled the publicity for Mima, an adaptation of The Red Mill by Ferenc Molnar, directed by his father-in-law David Belasco, and attempted to follow up the success of The Miracle with another Christian-themed spectacle, Freiburg Passion Play, an adaptation of the medieval mystery play. Freiburg Passion Play was a failure at the box office, however, and after Gest lost money in the Wall Street crash of October 1929, he was forced to declare bankruptcy, and experienced a decline in his physical and psychological health. After several years of recuperation, Gest made a Broadway comeback in 1936 with Lady Precious Stream, a Chinese drama that had premiered in London the previous year. Although criticism of Lady Precious Stream was generally favorable, it proved to be his last Broadway production. In 1939, Gest returned to his carnival roots at the New York World's Fair, where he produced an attraction known as Little Miracle Town, a village populated by dwarfs. Gest's final job as a producer was a series of benefit performances by Greek actress Katina Paxinou in 1941, who came to New York to raise money for war relief in her native country. Morris Gest died of pneumonia on May 16, 1942, and was survived by his wife, Reina Belasco Gest.

Oliver Martin Sayler (1887-1958) was a dramatic critic and theatrical press agent who worked with Morris Gest for two decades and planned to write a full-length biography of Gest. Born in Huntington, Indiana on October 23, 1887, and educated at Oberlin College, Sayler got his professional start as a theater critic for the Indianapolis News and Boston Evening Transcript. In the 1910s, he toured Europe, notably visiting Russia to attend theatrical performances and interview directors and performers between 1917 and 1918 while revolution and civil war unfolded around him. His experiences in Russia were detailed in the books Russia, White or Red (1919) and The Russian Theatre under the Revolution (1920), later revised and republished as The Russian Theatre (1922). Sayler's other published works include Our American Theatre (1923), Max Reinhardt and His Theatre (1924), Inside the Moscow Art Theatre (1925), and Revolt in the Arts (1930). He also served as editor for several published editions of classic plays, including The Eleonora Duse Series (1923) and The Moscow Art Theatre Series of Russian Plays (1922-1923). In the 1920s, Sayler and his business partner, Marjorie Barkentin, became Morris Gest's press agents, and they remained his representatives until his death in 1942. Sayler wanted to publish a full-length biography of Gest, Only in America, and worked on the manuscript for this book throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but was never able to find a publisher. In addition to his professional activities, Sayler had a keen interest in

the history of hairdressing and, with his business associate, Marjorie Barkentin (also a hair enthusiast with a large collection of antique hair accessories), he planned to write and publish a book on the subject, Crowning Glory. Like the Gest biography, this project was never realized. Oliver M. Sayler died of a heart attack on October 19, 1958.

Sources:

In addition to materials within the Morris Gest Collection, the following source was used:

Hohman, Valleri J. Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance In America, 1891-1933. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Scope and Contents

The Morris Gest Collection, 1864-1966 (bulk 1894-1958), compiled by Gest's press agents, Oliver Sayler and Marjorie Barkentin, documents the life and career of one of Broadway's most successful and well-known producers of the 1910s and 1920s. Included are materials from his productions of *The Miracle*, directed by Max Reinhardt and designed by Norman Bel Geddes, and of the Moscow Art Theatre's only performances in the United States. Also present are drafts of Sayler's unpublished biography of Gest, correspondence with well-known actors, directors, and dramatic critics, photographs of Gest and of his father-in-law producer David Belasco, original drawings and costume designs, posters, programs, and scripts. In addition, the collection contains scrapbooks, business and legal documents, clippings, and notes related to the professional and personal activities of Morris Gest, his business partner, F. Ray Comstock, and Oliver Sayler. The collection is organized into two series: Series I. Morris Gest Papers, 1872-1966 (28 boxes) and Series II. Oliver Sayler Papers, 1864-1958 (4 boxes).

Series I. contains two subseries: Subseries A. Only in America ("If This Be Madness" [circa 1935-1942]), 1872-1966 (17 boxes) and Subseries B. Productions, 1900-1959 (11 boxes). Subseries A. is comprised of typescript drafts of Sayler's unpublished biography of Gest, Only in America, organized by chapter with many handwritten annotations and notes, and the research materials Sayler gathered as he worked on the book. Research materials include Gest's business and legal correspondence and documents, Gest's personal correspondence, photographs of Gest and clippings related to his career, press releases for Gest's productions, and typescripts of reminiscences by Gest's associates and various writings about Gest. The subseries also contains Sayler's correspondence regarding the biography and extensive biographical files on Gest's family members and associates, including materials related to David Belasco, Reina Belasco Gest, Eleonora Duse, Alexander Moissi, Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, and many other performers who appeared in Gest's productions. Sayler's collection of materials related to David Belasco is particularly noteworthy, as it includes many portraits of Belasco and production photographs from over a dozen shows that he produced and/or directed. Also in this

subseries, a scrapbook compiled by producer F. Ray Comstock, Gest's business partner, documents his activities before, during, and after his association with Gest.

Materials related to individual shows and lecture tours produced by Gest are filed alphabetically by production title in Subseries B. These items include programs, posters and other advertisements, production photographs, designs, scores, press releases, clippings, transcripts of articles and interviews, and correspondence. The bulk of the material in this subseries is related to Gest's production of *The Miracle* and to the Moscow Art Theatre, including many articles written about these productions and biographical files on the directors, performers, designers, and writers associated with them, such as Norman Bel Geddes, Max Reinhardt, and Konstantin Stanislavsky. Subseries B. also contains some pieces of original artwork, notably costume designs for *Chu Chin Chow* and *Lady Precious Stream* and drawings by Violet Manners, Duchess of Rutland, whose daughter, Lady Diana Manners, performed in *The Miracle*.

Series II. contains material related to Oliver Sayler's professional activities and personal interests, including correspondence, collected writings and production materials, and materials related to Sayler's book projects. These include several folders of photographs of Max Reinhardt, Reinhardt's productions, and other German and Austrian theaters and productions from the early twentieth century, many of which were reproduced in his book *Max Reinhardt and the Theatre* (1924). Clippings, correspondence, outlines, and notes document Sayler's attempt to write and market a book on the history of hairdressing, Crowning Glory. The series also contains a significant volume of clippings and other collected materials on Shakespeare and Stratford-upon-Avon, also related to an unrealized book project, with many clippings dating from the Shakespeare tricentennial in 1916.

Note to Researchers

The Morris Gest Collection includes a significant amount of brittle and deteriorating paper, and caution should be used when handling collection materials. Items that are particularly fragile, including F. Ray Comstock's scrapbook and several folders of newspaper sections and newspaper clippings, may be handled only with curatorial approval. Digital copies of these items are available for use by researchers. Glass negatives of photographs of Morris Gest and David Belasco in Box 23 may be viewed with curatorial approval.

Related Material

The Harry Ransom Center has several other related collections. The Norman Bel Geddes Papers contain materials related to Bel Geddes's production of *The Miracle* and correspondence between Bel Geddes and Oliver Sayler. The Stella Adler Papers contain materials related to Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. The Dance Collection contains materials related to the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo (1911-1962). The B. J. Simmons Costume Design Records contain designs for European productions of some of the plays that Morris Gest produced in the United States, including *Aphrodite, Chu Chin Chow*, and *Mecca*.

Separated Material

A group of unfixed proofs and copy negatives of publicity photographs of actor Alexander Moissi were separated and placed in cold storage. Because of the light-sensitive nature of these materials, they are restricted from access. Access prints are available to researchers and located in the designated folders within the container list.

Index Terms

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Belasco, David, 1853-1931.

Comstock, F. Ray, 1880-.

Gest, Morris, 1881-1942.

Reinhardt, Max, 1873-1943.

Sayler, Oliver M., 1887-1958.

Organizations

Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi akademicheskii teatr (Moscow Art Theatre).

Shakespeare Memorial Company (Stratford-upon-Avon Festival Company).

Subjects

Theater--New York (State)--New York.

Theater--United States--History--20th century.

Theatrical producers and directors.

Document Types

- Clippings.
- Correspondence.

Drawings.

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Photographs.

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- Schindler, Solomon, 1842-1915--7.4
- Schlossmacher, Stephan Johann--7.9
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- Stevens, Ashton--7.17, 8.6
- Swope, Herbert Bayard, 1882-1958--7.15
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- Terhune, Albert Payson, 1872-1942--1.17
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