

Portia Morrow and Morelza Morrow:

An Inventory of Their Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Morrow, Portia (1899-1982) and Morrow, Morelza
Title:	Portia Morrow and Morelza Morrow Papers
Dates:	1927-1980
Extent:	4 document boxes, 2 oversize folders (1.68 linear feet)
Abstract:	Sisters Portia Lenore Morrow (1899-1982) and Mary Morelza Morrow worked onstage and behind the scenes in theaters in the United States and Europe. Photographs, correspondence, cards, newspaper clippings, original writings, drawings, printed materials and artifacts document the Morrow sisters' careers and personal interests from 1927 to 1980.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00183
Language:	English and German
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gift, 2005
Processed by:	Ancelyn Krivak, 2008
Repository:	The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center

Biographical Sketches

Sisters Portia Lenore Morrow (1899-1982) and Mary Morelza Morrow worked onstage and behind the scenes in theaters on Broadway, elsewhere in the United States, and in Europe from the 1920s to the 1950s. Born in West Texas to Dr. William H. and Lula Durham Morrow, Portia and her younger sister Morelza grew up in a series of small Texas towns with their three sisters and younger brother, William H. Morrow, Jr. After graduating high school, Portia and Morelza moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas. Portia left school without getting her degree and worked as a stenographer, including a stint with the Texas House of Representatives in 1921; Morelza received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in 1924. By the late 1920s, both sisters were pursuing careers in theater.

Portia Morrow moved to New York, where she became a member of Howard Clancy's Neighborhood Players company in Brooklyn, appearing in several plays from 1927 to 1929. In 1929, Portia (then working under her middle name, Lenore) was cast as an extra in Morris Gest and David Belasco's production of *The Freiburg Passion Play* at the Hippodrome on Broadway. She struck up a friendship with Belasco who, shortly before his death in 1931, recommended her to the estate of Lotta M. Crabtree, a nineteenth-century entertainer who left her multi-million dollar estate to charity. Crabtree established a fund for struggling actors, from which Portia received money from 1931 to 1937.

Beginning in 1930, Portia was engaged as understudy to the actress Katharine Cornell, working on at least two plays, *Dishonored Lady* and *Lucrece*. She had a small part in Philip Barry's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* in 1931, and in 1936 was cast as Margaret Fuller (now billed as Portia Morrow) in *Plumes in the Dust*, a play about Edgar Allan Poe. During the 1930s, Portia supplemented her income with secretarial work, drawing upon her earlier training as a stenographer. She worked for writer-director-actor Howard Lindsay, whose writing partner Russel Crouse jokingly gave Portia credit for writing the libretto of *Anything Goes* in 1934. Crouse and Lindsay went on to write the period comedy *Life with Father*, which debuted on Broadway in 1939. Portia played the part of the maid, Delia, for five years of the play's seven-year run.

When Portia Morrow left the *Life with Father* cast in 1944, she did not immediately return to acting, working instead as a cabaret performer in several New York nightclubs, including the Blackamoor Room and Le Ruban Bleu. Her act consisted of a set of poems by Langston Hughes that had been set to music by her accompanist, composer-pianist Herbert Kingsley. Portia reprised this act in Tokyo, where she served as a performer for the U.S. Armed Forces from 1945 to 1947. By 1949, Portia was working as an actress in New York again, with off-Broadway engagements in *Dark of the Moon* and, the following year, in Horton Foote's *Homecoming*. In 1950, Portia gave her final stage performances in two summer stock productions of *The Glass Menagerie*. Portia had married export-import salesman Oskar Lombek in 1948, and moved with him to suburban Rockland County, New York, where she lived until his death in 1969. Although she ceased to pursue a public career, Portia continued to develop her powers of creative expression, taking writing classes, trying her hand at poetry, fiction and drama,

and journaling regularly. Eventually Portia Morrow returned to Texas, settling in Kerrville. She died in Austin, Texas, on August 13, 1982.

Morelza Morrow took theater lessons in Mexico City and New York after graduating from the University of Texas. She lived in Europe from 1928 to 1931, studying in Dresden under director Josef Gielen, at Berlin University, and at the Sorbonne in Paris. In Vienna, she studied at the Max Reinhardt Seminary. Morelza returned to the United States in 1931 to manage the Little Theatre of Austin. Part of the nationwide "little theater movement" of the 1920s and 1930s, the Little Theatre of Austin derived its talent and financial support from the community, mounting small productions of classic and contemporary plays. The Little Theatre began producing plays in 1921, but was not formally incorporated until 1932, under Morelza's tenure as producing director. The theatre also gained a performance space, the Little Playhouse, and a school, the Theatre Workshop, run by Morelza and modeled after Theodora Irvine's Studio for the Theatre in New York. In 1933, Morelza left Austin for New York, but the Little Theatre continued as the Austin Civic Theatre. Now known as Zachary Scott Theatre Center, it is Austin's oldest professional theater organization.

In New York, Morelza worked for the Adjustment Service of New York State's Department of Education, a vocational guidance agency that worked with the Emergency Work Bureau to create educational and career opportunities for the unemployed during the Great Depression. She founded the American People's Theatre and its associated Free Theatre School in 1933. Beset by lack of funding and logistical challenges, the American People's Theatre folded in the mid-1930s; it appears that afterwards Morelza may have had a second career in anthropology. Her death date is unknown, but she was survived by her younger brother, oil and gas attorney William H. Morrow, Jr., whose daughter, Dana Morrow Butler, donated the papers of Morelza and Portia to the University of Texas in 2005.

Sources:

Barnes, Michael. "Let's Put On a SHOW!" *Austin American-Statesman*, June 28, 1998.

Crouse, Russel. "Explaining That Anything Goes." *New York Times*, November 25, 1934.

"Little Theater School." *Journal of Adult Education* 6 (1934): 85.

"Morrow Family, EARLY SETTLERS OF COLLIN COUNTY." Collin County, Texas History and Genealogy Webpage by Genealogy Friends of Plano Libraries, Inc. <http://www.geocities.com/genfriendsghl> (accessed 2008).

"Obit William H. Morrow, Jr." Morrow--Family History & Genealogy Message Board, Ancestry.com. <http://boards.ancestry.com/surnames.morrow/1364/mb.ashx> (accessed 2008).

Scope and Contents

Photographs, correspondence, cards, newspaper clippings, original writings, drawings, printed materials and artifacts document the careers and personal interests of sisters Portia and Morelza Morrow from 1927 to 1980. The collection is arranged in three series: I. Portia Morrow, II. Morelza Morrow, and III. Other Materials.

Series I documents the career and personal life of Portia Lenore Morrow from approximately 1927 through the 1950s, with a few clippings and pieces of correspondence from the 1960s and 1970s. The series is subdivided into three subseries, A. Career-Related, B. Personal, and C. Photographs.

Subseries A, Career-Related, contains materials related to theater productions Portia worked on and to her solo musical performances, arranged in alphabetical order, dating to her work with Howard Claney's Neighborhood Players from 1927-1929. These materials include contracts, playbills, and clippings of reviews. The musical performances folder contains an annotated typescript of the poem "Little Old Letter Blues" autographed to Portia by its author, Langston Hughes.

Subseries B, Personal, contains all materials not directly related to specific theater productions and musical performances, including artwork, correspondence, clippings, invitations and programs, and writings. The artwork includes drawings by Portia as well as a small painting by Howard Claney. Within the correspondence, letters and telegrams document Portia's personal and professional relationships with such luminaries of the theater as David Belasco, Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse, Ethel Merman, and Katharine Cornell. Correspondence with the estate of Lotta M. Crabtree regarding Portia's receipt of funds from a trust is so voluminous as to merit a separate file. Clippings include reviews of plays that Portia did not appear in, and obituaries of and articles about famous musical and theatrical performers. The invitations and programs are for church services and social events; printed materials include an issue of the magazine *Guitar Review*. Portia's original writings, mostly dating to the 1950s and typewritten, are numerous, encompassing poetry, fiction, daily journal entries, writings for Bible study classes, exercises for creative writing classes and notes (many of them written in shorthand). In addition, there is a file of poetry by Portia's friend William J. Powers.

The Photographs in Subseries C. include head shots and other portraits of Portia, portraits of friends and acquaintances such as Howard Claney and Howard Lindsay, and several portraits of benefactress Lotta M. Crabtree. The Miscellaneous folder contains several production shots from *Life with Father* and an autographed portrait of Ethel Merman.

Series II contains printed materials, clippings, photographs, writings and an artifact related to Morelza Morrow's work in the theater in Europe, Austin, and New York. Material related to the Little Theatre of Austin and the American People's Theatre is filed here, as well as the typescript of an original play. The photographs in Series II primarily depict Morelza Morrow, the Little Theatre of Austin, Austin actress Jessie

Mary Ramsey, and Morelza's Viennese/German theatrical acquaintances, such as Max Reinhardt and Josef Gielen. There are also numerous German theatrical production photos.

Series III, Other Materials, contains those items that do not clearly have a connection to either Portia or Morelza Morrow. The diploma and head shots of 1920s Broadway actress M. Beatrice Jennings were placed in this series because no correspondence or other documentation establishing a friendship with Portia or Morelza exists elsewhere in the collection. Other unidentified photographs, playbills for productions not associated with Portia or Morelza, and some printed materials, mostly relating to theater history, are filed here.

Separated Material

Books that belonged to Portia Morrow were transferred to the Ransom Center's Book Collection and five garments belonging to her (one black coat, one red coat, one blue robe with red pinstripes, and two black dresses) were added to the Personal Effects Collection.

Index Terms

Names

Belasco, David, 1853-1931
Claney, Howard Moorhead
Cornell, Katharine, 1893-1974
Crabtree, Lotta, 1847-1924
Crouse, Russel, 1893-1966
Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967
Jennings, M. Beatrice
Lindsay, Howard, 1889-1968
Merman, Ethel
Reinhardt, Max, 1873-1943

Organizations

American People's Theatre
Little Theatre of Austin

Subjects

Acting teachers

Actors and actresses

Theater--Austria--Vienna

Theater--Germany

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

Theater--Texas

Theater--United States

Theatrical producers and directors

Document Types

Clippings

Contracts

Drawings

Manuscripts

Photographs

Poems

Theatre programs

Series I. Portia Morrow, 1927-1980, undated**Subseries A. Career-Related, 1927-1950, undated**

AFPAC Theater, contracts and playbill, Tokyo, 1946-1947 [*oversize materials removed to lateral file 1]	Container 1.1*
<i>Dark of the Moon</i> , programs, 1949	Container 1.2
<i>Dishonored Lady</i> , contract, 1930	Container 4.1
<i>Glass Menagerie, The</i> , script, program, contract, and clippings, 1950 [*oversize materials removed to lateral file 2]	Container 1.3*
<i>Homecoming</i> , program and clipping, 1950	Container 1.4
<i>Life with Father</i> , clippings, 1939, 1943, undated	Container 1.5
<i>Lucrece</i> , contract, program and correspondence, 1932 [*oversize materials removed to folder 4.1]	Container 1.6*
Musical performances, clippings, programs, and correspondence, 1944-1947, with typescript of poem "Little Old Letter Blues" autographed by Langston Hughes, 1943	Container 1.7
Neighborhood Players, programs and clippings, 1927-1929	Container 1.8
<i>Plumes in the Dust</i> , contract, program and correspondence, 1936 [*oversize materials removed to folder 4.1]	Container 1.9*
<i>Tomorrow and Tomorrow</i> , contract and programs, 1931 [*oversize materials removed to folder 4.1]	Container 1.10*

Subseries B. Personal, 1927-1980, undated

Artworks, with painting by Howard Claney of Portia and Claney in <i>A Minuet</i> , undated	Container 1.11
Cards, 1934, 1969, undated	Container 1.12
Clippings, 1957-1968, undated	Container 1.13
Correspondence	
Envelopes and address labels, undated	Container 1.14
Estate of Lotta M. Crabtree, 1931-1937	Container 1.15

General, 1927-1980, undated	Container 1.16
Invitations and programs, 1928-1951	Container 2.1
Printed materials, includes <i>The Guitar Review</i> for October-November 1946, and undated materials	Container 2.2
Writings	
Bible study, undated	Container 2.3
Fiction, 1953, undated	Container 2.4
Journaling and memoirs, 1952-1958, undated	Container 2.5
Notes and exercises, 1952, undated	Container 2.6
Poetry, 1957, undated	Container 2.7
Poetry by William J. Powers, undated	Container 2.8
Subseries C. Photographs, 1929-1937, undated	
Belasco, David, undated	Container 4.2
Buchanan, O. P., undated	Container 2.9
Claney, Howard, undated	Container 2.10
Cornell, Katharine, undated	Container 4.3
Crabtree, Lotta, undated	Container 2.11
Lindsay, Howard, undated	Container 2.12
Morrow, Portia, 1929-1937, undated [*oversize materials removed to folders 4.4-5]	Container 2.13-14*
Powers, William J.?, undated	Container 2.15
Miscellaneous, includes production shots from <i>Life with Father</i> and autographed portrait of Ethel Merman, undated	Container 2.16

Series II. Morelza Morrow, 1928-1933, undated**Subseries A. Theater Papers, 1928-1933, undated**

American People's Theatre, typescript re early history, undated	Container 3.1
German acting school brochure and musical program, 1928	Container 3.2
German and Austrian actors and directors, clippings, 1930, undated [*oversize materials removed to folder 4.6]	Container 3.3*
Little Theatre of Austin, playbills, clippings, business cards, wooden tray, 1931-1933, undated	Container 3.4-5
Untitled play by Morelza Morrow and Mary Surace re Stephen F. Austin, typescript, undated	Container 3.6

Subseries B. Photographs, 1928-1929, undated

Angel, Miguel, 1928	Container 3.7
Germany	
Miscellaneous portraits, undated	Container 3.8
Miscellaneous production photographs, circa 1929	Container 3.9
Gielen, Josef, 1928	Container 3.10
Little Theatre of Austin, undated	Container 3.11
Morrow, Morelza, undated	Container 3.12
Ramsey, Jessie Mary, undated	Container 3.13
Reinhardt, Max, undated	Container 3.14

Series III. Other Materials, 1928-1952, undated

Jennings, M. Beatrice

Institute of Religious Science diploma, 1952

Container 4.7

Photographs, undated

Container 3.15

Photographs, miscellaneous, includes many unidentified portraits, undated

**Container
3.16**Printed materials, with "Hollywood in Japan," *The Literary Digest*, September 15, 1928, and undated materials**Container
3.17**

Theater programs, 1940-1942, undated

Container 3.18

Oversize materials

Container 4