

Irma Kay

**OPERA RING THEATER, 1954 - 1967**

**Collection Number: 990.27**

**SAN FRANCISCO PERFORMING ARTS LIBRARY AND MUSEUM**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Provenance

The body of the Opera Ring Theatre Collection was donated to SF PALM in early 1990 by Irma Kay, the director and founder of the Opera Ring Theater.

### Publication Rights

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### Collection Number

990.27

### Size

Number of containers: 4 boxes, 1 carton  
Linear feet: 3.5

### Processed by:

Paul Padgette

### Date Completed

November 1990

## BIOGRAPHY

### IRMA KAY

Irma Kay, founder and director of the San Francisco Opera Ring from 1954 to 1967, had a broad-based background in the performing arts before arriving in the Bay Area in 1952. She was born in Philadelphia, and while still in school, she began giving theatrical performances. Trained as a pianist, she had derived additional inspiration from her brother, Hershy Kay\*, a composer, musical arranger and conductor.

When Irma joined Hershy in New York, she studied dance with Martha Graham and gained experience working at the Neighborhood Playhouse and off-broadway's Provincetown Playhouse. Summer stock followed. After a time in Los Angeles, still involved with performance, Irma came to San Francisco where she founded the Opera Ring Theater. She presently resides in San Rafael.

\*Hershy Kay was a composer, conductor, and musical arranger. By 1943 he was on the NBC staff. He gained fame working on the Broadway shows: On the Town, Peter Pan, Candide, and Once Upon a Mattress. He also worked with the Martha Graham Company, Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet.

## HISTORY

### OPERA RING THEATER

Irma Kay's vision was to produce operas in English and in-the-round in order to reach out to and educate an audience unfamiliar with traditional opera production. After much negotiation, she rented space at the Theatre Arts Colony building on Washington Street. The Opera Ring Theater Company opened to good reviews with a production of Gian-Carlo Menotti's The Telephone and The Medium, in July 1954.

Encouraged by the favorable reception, Irma managed to secure a lease on a warehouse with adequate auditorium and stage space at 123 South Van Ness Avenue. A Board of Directors was formed to manage the Opera Ring Association. Rehearsals were held, and the the West Coast Premiere of Kurt Weill's The Threepenny Opera, opened on September 21, 1955. Although the critics were favorable to Irma's ambitious project, there were rough spots to be overcome. The run was extended more than once, running 23 weeks, until March, 1956. It was immediately followed by a revival of The Telephone and The Medium which ran for three months.

In June, 1956, John Latouche's The Golden Apple, music by Jerome Moross, played a three month run. Kurt Weill's Street Scene, Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate followed. The theme had been established. "Grand" opera was not to be the performance medium of the Opera Ring. The 30 productions of the next decade would all be from the classical musical comedy genre, i.e. Finian's Rainbow, Carousel, Lady in the Dark, Oklahoma, Guys and Dolls, to name a few. The unique factor was that all were performed "in the round".

Other performance elements were added including concerts of chamber music, and dance of the Renaissance. Children's productions such as Hansel and Gretel, and Heidi, were produced between the main staged productions. Saturday nights at midnight there were "melodramas" complete with olio acts. Productions often alternated, one playing Thursday and Friday, another on Saturday and Sunday. The Opera Ring had as many as 85 singers, actors and dancers working on several productions at the same time. Can-Can (1959-1961) and West Side Story (1960-1962) each ran for two years. There were revivals of The Golden Apple, Threepenny Opera, Pal Joey, Guys and Dolls, and Little Mary Sunshine.

Dramatic productions such as Dirty Hands by Sartre, and Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth were presented under the banner of the Theatre Ring.

Although the casts were primarily composed of local performers, there are names from the eleven years of the Opera Ring that are recognized by music and theatre patrons. Morgan Freeman was with the O.R. from 1960-62 and appeared in Once Upon a Mattress, West Side Story, and as the street singer in revival of Threepenny Opera. Diane Berman was a leading lady in several O.R. shows as was June Purviance. Donna Petersen of the San Francisco Opera appeared in early Opera Ring productions, as did Marty Buchwald, aka Marty Balin who went on to create SF Sound and the Jefferson Airplane.

Opera Ring's demise was due to two things. The golden age of musical comedy was coming to an end, and there wasn't new material of a like-kind to choose from. Locally, several large Las Vegas-type theaters opened with budgets allowing for "stars" who appealed to changing audience taste. The final production was Weill's Lost in the Stars, critically acclaimed, but poorly attended, in the summer of 1967. Earlier in the year, a Familiar Faces benefit for O.R. gave two performances of scenes from earlier productions with as many of the original players as could be assembled.

The Opera Ring closed in February, 1967.

### SCOPE AND CONTENT

The greater part of the Opera Ring Theater Collection, 1954-1967, consists of materials on paper, collected by Irma Kay, which document the history of the company. Included are programs, press clippings, staging diagrams, promotional materials, and production photographs. Included in the historical material are two company scrapbooks, and some framed awards.

The architectural materials include blueprints for the theater building, sketches and photos of the lobby, and lighting plans.

There is a small group of costume and set designs, but the costumes themselves are not a part of this collection.

Included in correspondence files are letters, drafts of speeches and some congratulatory telegrams. Other than a permit and union contract, there are few administrative records.

SERIES DESCRIPTION

SERIES 1. HISTORICAL/PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL

Box 1

Included in this series is the company history, promotional material, union contracts, correspondence, and information about the theater building including photos, sketches and seating charts, performance posters and architectural drawings.

SERIES 2. PERFORMANCE MATERIAL

Carton 1 and Box 2

Following a chronological listing by date of performance, this, the largest group of material is arranged alphabetically by title of the production. Usually two or more folders for each production. Programs and printed material are in one file followed by an envelope of photographs. in some cases there is additional material such as staging diagrams and cassettes of productions.

Box 2

Oversized production photographs

SERIES 3 BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

Box 3 (Oversized)

This series contains portraits of cast and technical staff and includes articles on individual performers.

SERIES 4 PRODUCTION MATERIAL

Box 4

In addition to a nice array of costume and set designs, this series includes some lighting plots, a script and some artifacts.

**CONTAINER LISTING**

**SERIES 1. HISTORICAL/PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL**

<u>Container</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
Box 1	1	<b>Historical</b> Historical Essays, Inventory Chronology, clippings, Article: "The Argonaut"	1954
	2	<b>Facility Information</b> Sketches, photos, seating plans, architectural drawings.	
	3	<b>Promotional material</b> Includes radio spots, advertising mats, etc.	
	4	<b>Twelve performance posters</b>	
	5	<b>Correspondence</b> 8 letters incl. Lenya Ira Gershwin "SF Examiner" Stewart	1957 1958 1957 1958
	6	<b>Union Contracts</b>	
	7	<b>Commemorative</b> 3 Plaques Actors Fund, Chamber of Commerce, Press Club SF Board of Supervisors	1960-61
	8	<b>Scrapbook</b> 1954-66	
	9	<b>Collage</b> The letters for "Opera Ring" covered in photograph pieces.	
	10	<b>Linoleum Block</b> Finian's Rainbow"	

**SERIES 2                  PERFORMANCE MATERIAL**

<u>Container</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
Carton 1	1	<b>Miscellaneous Programs</b> Photos & Clippings	
	2	<b>"The Boy Friend"</b> 2 clips 2 programs	1963-64
	3	18 photos	
	4	<b>"Brigadoon"</b> 1 program	1959-60
	5	7 photos	
	6	<b>"Can-Can"</b> 1 cast sheet 1 program	1959-61
	7	23 photos	
	8	<b>"Carousel"</b> 1958 22 - pieces-promo. programs, letters clippings	
	9	27 photos	
	10	<b>"Damn Yankees"</b>	1959
	11	1 program 2 photos	
	12	<b>"Familiar Faces"</b>	1966
	13	1 playbill 1 program 2 audio cassettes	
	14	<b>"Finian's Rainbow"</b> 1958 programs, playbills clippings - 6 pieces	
	15	28 photos	
	16	<b>"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"</b> 1960 1 program 2 clips	
	17	5 photos	

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<u>CONTAINER</u>	<u>FOLDER</u>	<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>DATES</u>
Carton 1	18	"Gianni Schicchi" "Sister Angelica" 5 photographs	1961
	19	"Golden Apple" programs, promo. clips. 13 pieces	1956
	20	54 photos	
	21	"Golden Apple" 1 program	1963
	22	"Guys and Dolls" programs, press clips. 6 pieces	1959
	23	28 photos	
	24	stage diagrams	
	25	"Guys and Dolls" (at San Quentin) 1 program, clips, 1 letter	1959
	26	4 photos	
	27	"Guys and Dolls" (Stern Grove) programs, clips	1965-66
	28	35 photos	
	29	"Hansel and Gretel" 2 programs	1956
	30	6 photos	
	31	"Kiss Me Kate" 2 programs and 4 press clips - 1 advertisement	1957
	32	10 photos	
	33	"Lady in the Dark" 2 programs 5 press clips 5 press releases	1958-59
	34	15 photos	
	35	"Little Mary Sunshine" 1 program 3 "art proofs" 1 letter	1962-63

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<u>CONTAINER</u>	<u>FOLDER</u>	<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>DATE</u>
Carton 1	36	"Little Mary Sunshine" 7 photos	1962-63
	37	"Little Mary Sunshine" 1 program	1965-66
	38	2 photos	
	39	"Lost in the Stars" 2 programs 2 press clips.	1966
	40	"Milk and Honey" 13 photos	1964-65
	41	"Oh Kay" 2 programs 4 press clips 8 releases	1958
	42	6 photos	
	43	"Oklahoma" 1 program	1964-65
	44	14 photos 10 photos	
	45	"Once Upon a Mattress" 1 program 3 press clips	1961-62
	46	13 photos	
	47	"Pal Joey" 2 programs 2 press clips.	1957-58
	48	19 photos	
	49	"Pal Joey" 1 program	1964
	50	34 press	
	51	"Sandhog" 2 programs 1 press clip 1 article	1957
	52	6 photos	
	53	"Silk Stockings" 1 program	1963-64
	54	11 photos	

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<u>CONTAINER</u>	<u>FOLDER</u>	<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>DATES</u>
Carton 1	55	"Street Scene" 1 article 1 program 1 playbill	1957
	56	9 photos	
	57	"Telephone and the Medium" 2 programs 3 press clips	1954
	58	32 photos	
	59	"Telephone..." revival 1 program 4 press clips	1956
	60	16 photos	
	61	"Three Penny Opera" 2 programs 1 cast sheet 2 playbills 13 press clips	1955
	62	62 photos	
	63	Tech lists; properties 41 pages	
	64	"Three Penny.." revival 1 program	1962
	65	18 photos	
	66	"West Side Story" 4 programs 6 press clips	1960-62
	67	22 photos	
<b>SERIES 2</b>		<b>OVERSIZED PHOTOGRAPHS</b>	
Box 2	68	"The Boy Friend" - 1963-64 4 photos Pictured: Sammie Bell, John Valle And Judy Goldring	
	69	"Brigadoon" - 1959-60 1 photo Pictured: Robert Tharp	
	70	"Carousel" - 1958 3 photos Pictured: Cornell McCary, and Joe Noriega	

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<u>CONTAINER</u>	<u>FOLDER</u>	<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>DATES</u>
<b>SERIES 2</b>			
Box 2	71	"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" 1 photo	1960
	72	"The Medium" 1 photo block	1954
	73	"Silk Stockings" 2 photos Pictured: Sandra Kelley and Val Renken, Hank Dreger, Jack Agnew	1963-64
	74	"Street Scene" 1 photo Pictured: James and Louise Oldt	1957
	75	"Threepenny Opera" 9 photos Pictured: Steve Cushing, Bill Moyer, and Irma Kay	1962
	76	"West Side Story" 4 photos Pictured: Sammie Belcher, Milt Castro and Lucinda Simpson	1960-62

**SERIES 3                    BIOGRAPHICAL    MATERIALS**

<u>Container</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
Box 3	1	Irma Kay 2 Photos	
	2	Floy Parker	
	3	Company portraits 16 photos incl. designers, pianists, choreographers	
	4	Related Articles re: Hershey Kay Morgan Freeman	

