

RE: SOURCES
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**THEATRE COLLECTIONS AT SPECIAL COLLECTIONS &
ARCHIVES, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES**

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Special Collections & Archives contains several important named theatre collections. Notable collections include the Arena Stage Collection, the Robert Breen / American National Theater and Academy Collection, and the Theater of the Thirties Collection. Used by researchers all over the world, these collections contain production notebooks, playbills, playscripts, photographs, scrapbooks, correspondence, and news clippings.

THE ARENA STAGE COLLECTION

The Arena Stage Collection [<http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/arena.htm>] spans the theatre's fifty-year history. Cofounded in 1950 by Zelda Fichandler and Edward Mangum, Arena Stage was an early leader in the resident-theatre movement. Mangum, a faculty member from George Washington University, and Zelda Fichandler, one of his students, opened the theatre in Washington, D.C., to fill the relative void left by the closing of the National Theater in 1948.

Deriving its name from the idea of a "theatre in the round," Arena Stage became one of the first resident theatres in the United States. As opposed to theatres that presented Broadway shows by traveling companies, resident theatre depended upon local actors, directors, designers, and technicians to perform shows. Beginning with a company of only eight actors, Arena Stage began operation on 16 August 1950, presenting *She Stoops to Conquer* in Washington's Hippodrome Theatre, a former 247-seat burlesque and "art" moviehouse.¹ On opening night, a poster in the lobby stated that Arena Stage produced so-called Legitimate Shows. Arena moved into part of the Old Heurich Brewery in 1955 after its production of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (Fig. 1). By 1961, Arena was in a new building at its current location at Sixth Street and Maine Avenue.

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Figure 1.

Arena Stage's 1955 production of Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap*.

Today, Arena Stage averages over two hundred and fifty thousand patrons during its September to June season. It also employs nearly two hundred theatre professionals, including craftpersons who are responsible for making the costumes and scenery for each production. Arena also engages in public service programs, introducing younger audiences to theatre through performances and workshops. Over twenty-five thousand students each year take part in these programs.

Donated to George Mason University in Fall 2000, the Arena Stage Collection includes production notebooks, photographs, playbills, scrapbooks, and handwritten correspondence. The total volume of the collection is 245 cubic feet or 366 linear feet.

Electronic finding aids / research guides for record series in the Arena Stage Collection can be found on-line at <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/eadfndg aids.html> .

THE ROBERT BREEN / AMERICAN NATIONAL THEATRE AND
ACADEMY (ANTA) COLLECTION

In the early 1930s, a small group of arts patrons from Philadelphia and New York began to act upon their conviction that Americans should have a national theatre organization that would serve the American public better than Broadway, with its high ticket prices and limited touring policy. Under the leadership of Leopold Stokowski, and with the help of several influential supporters, they persuaded Congress to enact a federal charter for a national theatre—a rare and significant authorization previously targeted for the Smithsonian Institution, the Red Cross, and the Federal Reserve Bank. Signed by Franklin Roosevelt on 3 July 1935, the charter of the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) called for:

A people's project, organized and conducted in their interest, free from commercialism, but with the firm intent of being as far as possible self-supporting. A national theatre should bring to the people throughout the country their heritage of the great drama of the past and the best of the present, which has been too frequently unavailable to them under existing conditions.²

Action on the new charter stalled for nearly a decade, however, with the creation of the WPA Federal Theatre Project, which provided Depression relief to theatre artists from 1935 until 1939, and then with the onset of World War II. More important, the ANTA board, comprised of prominent citizens and business leaders from outside the theatre community, could not agree on the goals of ANTA.

When the war ended, Robert Breen, a dynamic theatre director, actor, and producer, fresh from the Army Air Corps, saw in ANTA the opportunity for his vision of a national theatre. He persuaded a fellow veteran, Robert Porterfield, founder of the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia, to join him in his efforts to devise and propose to the ANTA board a plan for a foundation-supported national theatre.

In 1946 the ANTA board voted to accept the Breen–Porterfield Foundation Plan and persuaded Robert Breen to serve as executive secretary of ANTA. To provide the organization with necessary expertise, the board was reconstituted to include prestigious theatre professionals such as Brooks Atkinson, Cheryl Crawford, Paul Green, Moss Hart, Helen Hayes, Sam Jaffe, and Raymond Massey.

Robert Breen and a small, dedicated team comprising mostly volunteers set furiously to work in Breen's own living quarters above the Hudson Theater on 44th Street in New York City. At his side was his coworker and wife, Wilva



Figure 2.

Robert Breen (center) in the 1949 ANTA production of *Hamlet* in Denmark.

Davis Breen, who had been instrumental in promoting and guiding the ANTA plan to completion. Together, they had established the Chicago unit of the Federal Theatre Project; this experience convinced Breen that theatre in America needed more than a temporary relief program.

Thus began a remarkable period in American theatre that, with the infusion of ANTA support and energy, saw the revival of experimental theatre in New York, the growth of regional and university theatre programs, the encouragement of playwrights and performers, the broadcasting of quality dramatic presentations to millions of Americans on television in its fledgling years, and groundbreaking cultural exchanges (Fig. 2) that warmed cold-war years.

With the Robert Breen / American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) Collection [<http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/anta.html>], one may research the early beginnings of government support for the performing arts and the people responsible for them. The collection details the work of Breen—the driving force behind the reformation of ANTA in 1946 and a staunch supporter

of its eventual successor, the National Endowment for the Arts—and provides a better understanding of the early operations of ANTA.

Covering the years 1933–1980, it consists of working papers, correspondence, drafts, news clippings, scripts, photographs, and other theatrical materials that document Breen’s career with ANTA from 1944 to 1952. The collection also reflects Breen’s personal interests, such as television, film, and political causes. Total volume of the collection is 52 cubic feet or 78 linear feet.

An electronic collection of scanned documents from the Robert Breen / ANTA Collection is available on-line [<http://www.aladin.wrlc.org/dl/>].

THEATER OF THE THIRTIES

The Federal Theater Project (FTP) was a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was established to provide work for unemployed citizens during the Great Depression. The FTP began in August 1935 and flourished as the first and only government-sponsored and -subsidized theatre program in the United States. It was headed by Hallie Flanagan (1890–1969) and was a way for theatrical professionals to gain employment during the Depression. The repertoire of plays was vast, including revivals of the classics and new and experimental works like the *Living Newspaper*, a series of plays based on then-current events.

Because these FTP plays needed advertising, the Federal Art Project (FAP), a section of the WPA, set up their Poster Division, which put many young artists to work designing posters using both established and experimental methods. Professional set and costume designers such as Nat Karson, Howard Bay, and Ralph Chesse, to name a few, were also in the FTP’s employ. The Theater of the Thirties Collection [<http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/federal.html>] contains a series of nearly one thousand slides of the FTP posters, set designs, and costume designs.

An electronic collection of scanned images made from 35mm slides of the posters, set designs, and costume designs (Fig. 3) is available at <http://www.aladin.wrlc.org/gsd/collect/fpp/fpp.shtml>.

In addition to the poster and design units, a photographic unit was set up to document the productions and ensure a graphic record of the FTP. Project photographers worked in every major city and on each major production, recording not only the actual theatre productions themselves but also capturing on film the rehearsals, the audience, the behind-the-scenes work of the stage crew, and the equipment used to produce FTP plays. Special Collections & Archives has more than three thousand black-and-white photographs and eighty-seven hundred negatives of FTP productions.



Figure 3.
Poster from FTP production *Flight* (left) and costume design
from *Dr. Faustus*.

The Theater of the Thirties Collection also contains more than two hundred oral-history interviews of members of the FTP, the FAP, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers Project. The interviews were conducted between 1961 and 1984, with the majority having been done in the 1970s.

An electronic finding aid / research guide for the WPA Oral Histories in the Theater of the Thirties Collection can be found at <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/eadfndgaids.html>.

OTHER THEATER COLLECTIONS IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVES

Besides the previously mentioned theatre collections housed at George Mason University, Special Collections & Archives also has other theatre- and film-related materials, including the following.

The Becher Playscript Collection

This collection [<http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/becher.htm>] contains nearly three hundred playscripts by the Special Services Division of the U.S.

Army that were used in productions to inform and entertain servicemen and -women during World War II. The productions mostly featured war-related topics. Several scripts for nonmilitary productions are included.

An electronic finding aid / research guide for the Becher Playscript Collection can be found at <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/eafndgaids.html>.

The Arthur H. Peterson Theater Collection

Books, published plays, and journals relating to American theatre make up this collection. Materials were donated by Arthur Peterson, a former Federal Theater Project employee who later appeared in several television programs, most notably at The Major on “Soap.” The collection includes scripts for these programs.

Cynthia Garn Film Collection

This houses original film scripts, including *Colossus* by James Bridges and *Freud* by John Huston and Wolfgang Reinhardt. It also contains scrapbooks representing artistic design research compiled by Hecht–Hill–Lancaster for Universal Studios’ 1957 film production of George Bernard Shaw’s *The Devil’s Disciple*. Garn’s father, Alexander Golitzen, was an artistic designer with Universal City Studios.

The E. P. Conkle Collection

This collection [<http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/conkle.html>] contains theatre materials including plays, poetry, short stories, and book manuscripts written by E. P. Conkle. Many were revised and annotated in his hand. The works are mainly from the period 1939–1975, when Conkle was a professor at the University of Texas at Austin. There are also copies of playbills and director’s notes from various productions of *Prologue to Glory*, a Federal Theatre Project play produced in 1938–1939, and three bound volumes of *Honest Abe*, a radio script produced by the Columbia Broadcasting System in 1940–1941. Also included in the collection are works and notes from former students, scholarly works by Conkle, and correspondence from his wife to George Mason University about his life and work.



GMU Libraries’ Special Collections & Archives is open to the public Monday–Friday, 12:30 PM until 5 PM. Evening and weekend appointments are

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subject to staff availability. Communication ahead of time is always a good idea. For further information, please contact Special Collections & Archives at (703) 993-2220, by e-mail at speccoll@gmu.edu, or via the Internet at <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections>.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Maslon, *The Arena Adventure: The First Forty Years* (Washington, D.C.: Arena Stage, 1990).
2. American National Theatre and Academy Charter, 3 July 1935.