



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Rare Book & Manuscript Library

Louis Dropkin Papers,
1941-1956 (Bulk dates: 1947-1952)
MS# 1436

©2007 Columbia University Library

SUMMARY INFORMATION

Creator

Louis Dropkin, 1915-1997

Title and dates

Louis Dropkin Papers, 1941-1956 (Bulk dates: 1947-1952)

Abstract

This collection consists of scripts and other materials related to the work of American radio, stage, and screen writer and producer Louis Dropkin. It provides insight into the nature of a journeyman writer/producer's professional life during the years when television first began to challenge radio for mass media dominance in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Size

1.5 linear feet (3 document boxes)

Call number

MS# 1436

Location

Columbia University
Butler Library, 6th Floor
Rare Book and Manuscript Library
535 West 114th Street

New York, NY 10027

Language(s) of material

English

Biographical Note

Louis "Lou" Dropkin pursued a career in the entertainment industry at a particularly interesting time in its history. In 1948, there were fewer than one million television sets in the United States; by the mid-1950s, there were more than thirty-five times that number. The 1940s and 1950s saw television become a fixture in United States homes while radio's claim to being America's dominant national entertainment medium had its denouement. As a writer and producer for both radio and television during these years, Lou Dropkin was right in the middle of this transition.

Though much of Dropkin's early writing experience appears to have consisted of short essays, by the mid-1940s he had found both a talent for writing dramatic scripts and a professional partnership with his fellow New Yorker, Felix Leon. Their early collaborations focused on radio scripts that ranged from dark looks at topical events such as the drama "Is Hitler Dead" to the sentimental and somewhat tongue-in-cheek "By a Nose," a story of the strong bond between a carousel horse and his young rider, both of which were produced in 1946.

The Dropkin and Leon partnership was suspended briefly from 1946-1947, when Dropkin left New York to take a job writing, editing, directing, and producing radio programs for WBAL in Baltimore. According to one of his former employers at WBAL, while there Dropkin focused on "dramatic, public service and those special last minute shows which seem to be a part of radio," and his extant scripts from that period demonstrate a particular focus on documentary and public service programs that ranged from histories of Baltimore to an examination of the dangers of tuberculosis.

Dropkin continued his radio work after he returned to New York in late 1947, most notably helping to produce WNEW's weekly "The American Spirit!" series. Airing in the early 1950s, this program—in the words of the introduction to each episode—sought "to illustrate musically and dramatically various aspects of the American spirit" and "to provide a hearing for young actors" by adapting plays by some of America's most famous playwrights (including Eugene O'Neill, Robert E. Sherwood, and Maxwell Anderson) and having them performed on the radio by aspiring actors from the Professional Training Program of the American Theatre Wing.

It was during this period, however, that Dropkin also began to focus his creative efforts on the emerging medium of television. His training in documentary work from his radio days undoubtedly helped this endeavor, netting him opportunities at NBC's New York affiliate, WNBT, in the early 1950s for which Dropkin produced several short nonfiction pieces. At least one of these programs—about the state of New York City's disaster preparedness plans—was hosted by the noted early television personality Ben Grauer, and was the type of show that proved instrumental in solidifying Grauer's transition from radio to television. Nevertheless, it appears that Dropkin's real creative passion after his return to New York was writing the short vaudeville-style sketches which characterized many early television offerings of the time. In this pursuit, he found the revival of his partnership with Felix Leon to be particularly fruitful.

Though they occasionally tried their hands at other genres—such as the three-act stage play "An Eagle in the House," or comic songs like "I Dillied When I Should Have Dallied"—Dropkin and

Leon's bread-and-butter pieces were short farces that revolved around misunderstandings, counterintuitive situations, and physical gags. In "The Second Report," for example, Dropkin and Leon poked fun at a Kinsey-esque sex researcher who seemingly had interest in the sexual habits of every woman but his wife. "The Child is the Father of the Man" featured a son and daughter telling off their curfew-breaking parents, while "The Home Life of an Eskimo" found its punch line in a polar bear who, having eaten the husband and assumed his place in the family igloo, finds himself beholden to the same nagging wife that drove the husband outside and into the bear's clutches in the first place.

Dropkin and Leon found some success in television with their sketches, getting at least one ("The Missing Check") performed by Sid Caesar on the *Admiral Broadway Revue*—a variety show better-known by its later name, *Your Show of Shows*—in 1949. (They would later write several pieces specifically with the emerging comic star Caesar in mind.) But Dropkin's and Leon's sketches also show signs of the transitioning nature of the television industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For example, many of their scripts appear to have been written with either stage or television in mind, sometimes with multiple versions apparently intended for one medium or the other. Equally telling, the pair seems to have curtailed their writing of vaudeville-style sketches after producing a flurry of them in the late 1940s, indicating that Dropkin and Leon were adapting to the general trend of television in the 1950s to eschew the variety shows that characterized its initial years in favor of programming such as game shows, news and public service programs, and serial dramas and comedies. Indeed, as the 1950s wore on and television programming became more regularized, Dropkin and Leon collaborated on screen treatments and longer scripts and appear to have abandoned the sketch format entirely.

Lou Dropkin was a writer who came of age in a time of tremendous technological and cultural change, and he seems to have been keenly aware of the opportunities of his moment. Even while making a career in radio, he kept an eye on other media, as indicated by a copy of a 1945 essay by the filmmaker Leo Hurwitz that Dropkin saved along with the drafts of his scripts. Titled "The Director's Job," it set out to analyze the different tasks of and creative potentials for directors in radio, stage, film, and television productions. "The television medium is at the beginning of a long road," wrote Hurwitz, and it turned out to be a road that Lou Dropkin and others like him were instrumental in paving. While Dropkin's work is largely forgotten today, it seems safe to say that without writers, producers, and directors like him, radio and television in the 1940s and 1950s would not have existed as they did. Little is known about Dropkin's life after this period, though he died in late 1997 at the age of 82.

This biographical note was based largely on material contained within the Louis Dropkin Papers. Supplementary information was found in: "Paid Notice: Deaths, Lou Dropkin," New York Times, 4 October 1997, and Lisa Parks, "Cracking Open the Set: Television Repair and Tinkering with Gender, 1949-1955," in Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950's, Janet Thumin, editor. (London: I.B. Tauris & Company, 2002).

Description

By the far the largest types of material in the Louis Dropkin Papers are scripts for radio, stage, and television shows dating from the 1940s and 1950s. Many of these scripts appear in multiple drafts and contain handwritten corrections. Some of them have note cards indicating which producers they were distributed to. The Louis Dropkin Papers also include some short prose pieces, songs, manuscripts by authors other than Dropkin, and a small collection of correspondence related to his professional life.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in three series.

Series I: Stage and Television Scripts, circa 1948-1956

Subseries 1: Sketches, circa 1948-circa 1953

Subseries 2: Television Scripts and Treatments, 1950-1956

Subseries 3: "An Eagle in the House," circa 1940s-1952

Series II: Radio Scripts, 1946-1952

Series III: Other Writings, 1941-circa 1950s

Subseries 1: Prose, circa 1940s

Subseries 2: Songs, circa 1950s

Subseries 3: Writings by Others, 1941-1953

Series I: Stage and Television Scripts, circa 1948-1956

Series I is composed almost entirely of scripts written by Louis Dropkin. In the vast majority of cases, these scripts were co-written with Felix Leon. Correspondence concerning the production or attempted production of one of the scripts is included in a small number of folders in this series.

Items are arranged in alphabetical order according to script title in each subseries of Series I. Multiple drafts of substantially similar material occasionally appear in the collection under different titles. In these cases, all identifiable draft titles are listed in the folder title. The folder title indicates those folders in this series which include multiple drafts of the same script or materials that are not a script (eg., correspondence).

Subseries 1: Sketches, circa 1948-circa 1953. Comprising the majority of this series, this subseries contains drafts of short comedic sketches that were written for the stage, television screen, or potentially both. In almost every case, the same sketch appears in a variety of forms—often with substantial changes from draft to draft. In many cases, these scripts had attached note cards which appear to indicate which drafts were sent to which producers. In a few cases, the sketches appear to be performing scripts rather than drafts, and in one case a newspaper review was attached to a script.

Subseries 2: Television Scripts and Treatments, 1950-1956. This subseries contains scripts and treatments that were clearly intended for television production. Several of the items in this subseries appear to be shooting scripts rather than drafts. With only two exceptions, it is unclear whether Dropkin was the author, producer, or both for these productions.

Subseries 3: "An Eagle in the House," circa 1940s-1952. This subseries is comprised of three drafts of a full-length stage play entitled either "An Eagle in the House" or "Peter and the Platypus," and one draft of a musical called "Don't Mention It!" that was based on the play.

Series II: Radio Scripts, 1946-1952

Nearly every item in this series is a production copy of a radio script, many of which were written by Dropkin and at least some of which were produced by him. There are also a few manuscript drafts for which production status is indeterminable. The scripts in this series cover a range of topics, but the two biggest groups include radio dramas and documentaries.

Of particular note in this series are scripts from two radio serials with which Dropkin was intimately involved: "The American Spirit" and "Mount Vernon Place." Each episode of the former program featured an adaptation of a story from some of the United States' most famous

playwrights performed by aspiring actors from the American Theatre Wing, a professional group with which Dropkin was associated. The latter program was a documentary series that focused on Baltimore and Maryland history, aired by Dropkin's long-time employer, the Baltimore radio station WBAL.

Folders in Series II are arranged in alphabetical order according to program series title unless no such title is evident. In these cases, folders have been arranged by episode title. The folder title indicates those folders in this series which include multiple drafts of the same script or materials that are not a script (eg., correspondence).

Series III: Other Writings, 1941-circa 1950s

The small amount of material in this collection which is neither a script nor directly related to one is arranged in Series III. It comprises prose pieces written by Dropkin and others, several songs, and a small volume of correspondence and other material related to Dropkin's professional life.

Items in this series are arranged in alphabetical order within each subseries according to the titles indicated on the individual pieces. In a few cases, no title was indicated on an item—folders containing such materials have been given descriptive titles. The single folder of correspondence is arranged in chronological order. The folder title indicates those folders in this series which include multiple drafts of the same script or materials that are not a script (eg., correspondence).

Subseries 1: Prose, circa 1940s. This subseries contains short prose pieces written by Dropkin. Most of the manuscripts in this series are short essays or biographical profiles of literary and entertainment figures which Dropkin apparently attempted to publish. In addition, this subseries contains a large number of play reviews (perhaps written by Dropkin in his role as a member of a theater workshop) and a few notes for works-in-progress.

Subseries 2: Songs, circa 1950s. Though a few songs appear in Series I due to their inclusion in sketches written by Dropkin and Leon, the songs in this subseries appear to have been written in order to stand alone.

Subseries 3: Writings by Others, 1941-1953. This subseries consists of three distinct types of material written by people other than Dropkin: correspondence, forms, and creative writings. The correspondence concerns Dropkin's professional life exclusively, and includes letters from potential producers of his work, letters of reference from former employers, and letters concerning programs he was producing. The two forms in this subseries include an American Theatre Wing workshop schedule that included several of the works and authors found in this collection and a standard intellectual property waiver from the National Broadcasting Company. The creative writings in this subseries include a range of sketches, songs, and essays, perhaps the most noteworthy of which is Leo Hurwitz's essay on the similarities of and differences between directing stage, radio, television, and movie productions.

ACCESS AND USE

Access

This collection has no restrictions.

This collection is located off-site. You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library reading room.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML approves permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

ACQUISITION AND APPRAISAL

Provenance and Acquisition

Gift of Augusta Dropkin, 1998 January 7

Accrual of Records

No additions are expected.

PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION

Processing Information

This collection was processed by Nicholas Patrick Osborne (GSAS 2012). Finding aid written by Nicholas Patrick Osborne in April 2008.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*

Encoding

Finding aid written in English.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Louis Dropkin Papers; Box and Folder; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Subject Headings

These papers have been indexed in the Columbia University Library online catalog using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

Caesar, Sid, 1922-
Dropkin, Louis, 1915-1997
Leon, Felix.
Radio--History
Radio Scripts
Television--History
Television Scripts
Variety shows (Television programs)
Your show of shows (Television program)

Series I: Stage and Television Scripts, circa 1948-1956
Subseries 1: Sketches, circa 1948-circa 1953

Box 1

- F.1 "The Aldrich Family," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, undated
F.2 Aldrich Family Script (Untitled), undated
F.3 "A Bartender's Bartender," "Special Material for George De Witt,"
"Say When," or "The Bartender Spot," by Louis Dropkin and
Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts (with Correspondence), circa
1949-1951
F.4 "The Battle of Battle Creek," circa 1949
F.5 "Call a Taxi," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts,
circa 1949
F.6 "The Child is the Father of the Man," by Louis Dropkin and Felix
Leon--Multiple Drafts, undated
F.7 "Cinder in the Eye," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, circa 1949
F.8 "Don't Wake Up Till I Grow Up," Sketch by Louis Dropkin and
Felix Leon, Lyrics by Larry Markes, Music by Charles
Murray--Multiple Drafts, undated
F.9 "Faye and Elliot at Breakfast," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
F.10 "A Federal Offense," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, circa 1949
F.11 "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," undated
F.12 "The Front Page Story," or "The Family Newspaper," by Louis
Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts, circa 1948
F.13 "High School Reunion: A Routine for Sid Caesar," by Louis
Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts, undated
F.14 "The Home Life of an Eskimo," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
F.15 "Home of the Brave," undated
F.16 "The House That Jack Built," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon,
undated
F.17 "An Important Message," or "Don't Write--Telegraph!," by Louis
Dropkin, Felix Leon, and David Rodgers--Multiple Drafts,
undated
F.18 "In a Little Gypsy Tea Room," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon,
circa 1949
F.19 "Kill the Umpire," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, undated
F.20 "Marriage License," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, circa 1949
F.21 "The Missing Check," "The Lost Check," or "Cafeteria Sketch," by
Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts (with
Review), circa 1949
F.22 "Nothing But the Best," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, undated
F.23 "A Pair of Shoelaces," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, circa 1949
F.24 "The Patient in Spite of Himself," or "Pulse: Normal," by Louis
Dropkin and Felix Leon,--Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
F.25 "Princess Margaret Rose," Featuring the Song "Decorum," Sketch
and Lyrics by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, circa 1953
F.26 "The Rooster and the Hen," Sketch by Louis Dropkin and Felix

- F.27 Leon, Music by Bob Colby, Lyrics by Mauri Edwards--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1950
- F.27 "Sauce for the Goose: A Dropkin & Leon's Eye View,"
undated
- F.28 "The Second Report," by Louis Dropkin, Felix Leon, and Ray
Golden--Multiple Drafts, circa 1949

Box 2

- F.1 "A Slight Case of Fungus," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
- F.2 "Soda with Two Straws," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
- F.3 "A Street Car Named Rumpelmeyer," by Louis Dropkin and Felix
Leon--Multiple Drafts, circa 1949
- F.4 "Subway Fare," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts,
circa 1949
- F.5 "Suits Pressed While You Wait," or "Jack Haley at the Cleaners,"
by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts, undated
- F.6 "Tickets Please!," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple
Drafts, circa 1949
- F.7 "The Typewriter: A Specialty for Sid Caesar," by Louis Dropkin
and Felix Leon, undated

Subseries 2: Television Scripts and Treatments, 1950-1956

- F.8 *Angel Auditions*: "Crosstown," 1954
- F.9 "Genius at Work," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, undated
- F.10 "The Goldwyn Story," WNBT Screenplay, 1950
- F.11 New York Disaster Preparedness Screenplay (Untitled), undated
- F.12 "The Piano," by Ben Ames Williams, Adapted for Television by
Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon (with Correspondence), 1956
- F.13 "Pin-Up Girl--1950," WNBT Screenplay, 1950
- F.14 "The Return," undated
- F.15 Weeping Willow Screen Treatment (Untitled), undated

Subseries 3: "An Eagle in the House," circa 1940s-1952

- F.16 "Don't Mention It!," Book and Lyrics by Lowell Salaway, Music
by George Engles, Based on "An Eagle in the House," by
Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, 1952
- F.17-19 "An Eagle in the House," or "Peter and the Platypus," by Louis
Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts, undated (3 folders)

Series II: Radio Scripts, 1946-1952

The American Spirit

- F.20 "Ah Wilderness," by Eugene O'Neill, Adapted for Radio, 1951
- F.21 "The American Way," by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart,
Adapted for Radio, undated
- F.22 "The Common Glory," by Paul Green, Adapted for Radio, 1952
- F.23 "The Devil and Daniel Webster," by Stephen Vincent Benet,
Adapted for Radio, undated
- F.24 "Of Mice and Men," by John Steinbeck, Adapted for Radio, 1952
- F.25 "The Petrified Forest," by Robert E. Sherwood, Adapted for Radio

- by Louis Dropkin, 1952
F.26 "Valley Forge," by Maxwell Anderson, Adapted for Radio, 1951
F.27 *The Baltimore Story*: "Star Spangled Banner," WBAL Radio--
Multiple Drafts, undated

Box 3

- F.1 "Death is the Hunter," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, undated
F.2 *The Experimental Radio Theater*: "Is Hitler Dead," by Louis Dropkin
and Felix Leon, 1946
F.3 *Harbor House* Episode, by Louis Dropkin, 1947

Mount Vernon Place
F.4 History of the Port of Baltimore, 1947
F.5 Story of Luther Martin--Multiple Drafts, 1947
F.6 Story of Old Ironsides, by Louis Dropkin, 1947

F.7 "'Red Goose,' by Norbert Davis. . .originally appeared in BLACK
MASK MAGAZINE, Feb 1934," Adapted for Radio by Louis
Dropkin, undated
F.8 "The Second Manhattan Project!," by Louis Dropkin--Multiple Drafts,
1949
F.9 "The Silent Invader," by Louis Dropkin, 1947
F.10 "The Square Peg Club," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, undated
F.11 "State of the Union," undated
F.12 *Us the Folks*: "By a Nose," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--
Multiple Drafts, circa 1946
F.13 "Women Can Keep Secrets," by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon,
undated

Series III: Other Writings, 1941-circa 1950s

Subseries 1: Prose, circa 1940s

- F.14 "Carl Sandburg: A Profile," by Louis Dropkin, undated
F.15 "Franklin Pierce Adams: A Profile," by Louis Dropkin--Multiple
Drafts (with Correspondence), 1942
F.16 "Henry Morgan," by Louis Dropkin, with WOR Press Release,
circa 1940s
F.17 "John Steinbeck: A Profile," undated
F.18 Notes, undated
F.19 "Pearl Buck: A Profile," by Louis Dropkin (with Correspondence),
undated
F.20 Play Reviews, undated
F.21 "A Quaint History of the Hat," by Louis Dropkin--Multiple Drafts,
undated
F.22 "The Smallest Light," by Louis Dropkin--Multiple Drafts, undated
F.23 "The Way of the Guerrilla," undated

Subseries 2: Songs, circa 1950s

- F.24 "Ain't Love Grand!," or "Sold American!," Lyrics by Louis
Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts (with
Correspondence), undated
F.25 "I Dillied When I Should Have Dallied," or "Let's Do It My Way!,"
Lyrics by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon--Multiple Drafts,

- undated
- F.26 "It Takes Two to Make a Kiss," Lyrics by Louis Dropkin and Felix Leon, Music by Albert Van Dam--Multiple Drafts and Published Sheet Music, 1950
- F.27 "The Wallflower Waltz," undated

Subseries 3: Writings by Others, 1941-1953

- F.28 American Theatre Wing Professional Training Program Writers Workshop Schedule, 1950 February 21
- F.29 Correspondence, 1941-1953
- F.30 "The Director's Job," by Leo Hurwitz, 1945 June
- F.31 "The Face of Spain," by Felix Leon, 1951
- F.32 "Movie Fans," by Seymour L. Bloom, undated
- F.33 NBC Waiver, undated
- F.34 "The Rembrandt Spirit," by Felix Leon, 1952
- F.35 "The Subway Rush Song," Music by Bob Colby, Lyrics by Mauri Edwards, undated