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Kenn Freeman Papers

Sc MG 262

**Bulk Dates:** 1930-1988

**Extent:** Shelving Unit:  
Linear feet: 2 1/2

**Source and Date:** Kenn Freeman, 1988

**Processor's Name:** Paula Williams

**Date Finding Aid Completed:** April 2001

**Processed:** Processed as part of the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project*. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City and State of New York.

**Abstract:** Freeman was an actor, director, scenic and costume designer, singer/dancer, and writer who performed in Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, and is most associated with his performances in the American and British productions of *Anna Lucasta* during the 1940s and 1950s.

**Provenance:** The papers were acquired after Kenn Freeman was taken to a nursing home. Friends called the Center and staff members were given access to the apartment where they sorted and packed all relevant materials.

**Organization note:** Collection is organized in three series: Freeman's Personal Papers, Professional Papers and Family Papers.

**Access:** Unrestricted access

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**Copyright:** Information on copyright (literary rights) available from repository.

**Other Source of Description:** RLIN #: NYPW.....

**Citation:** Kenn Freeman Papers, Sc MG 262, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

**Index Terms**

**Names:** Bee Freeman, Kenn Freeman.

**Subject:** African-Americans in the performing arts, Actors - United States, Actresses - United States, African-American actors, African-American actresses, Television actors - United States, Theatrical producers and directors, African-American singers, African-American dramatists, Dramatist, American

## **Preface**

The inventory was prepared as part of an archival preservation project to arrange, describe, and catalog resources essential for the study of African-American theater history. The necessary staff and supplies for *the Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project* were made available through a combination of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, State, and City of New York.

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**KENN FREEMAN (1917-1991) PAPERS (1930-1988).**  
3 boxes (2 1/2 lin. ft).

### **Biographical Sketch**

Kenn (Kenneth) Freeman was a versatile performing artist during the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to his acting career, he was a singer/dancer, writer, and director, and also designed costumes and sets. Freeman's exposure to the theatre began when as a young boy he toured with his mother, the actress, Bee Freeman. As a teenager he joined the Dramatic Society while attending De Witt Clinton High School and was a member of the City College Players during his years at City College. His early ventures in acting began in the period before he joined the United States Navy and included roles in the theatrical productions of: *The Youngest*, *Where the Cross Is Made*, *Ropes End*, and *Hell's Half Acre*. After his discharge from the Navy in 1945, he appeared in the Broadway and British productions of *Anna Lucasta*. He also had a role in *Because I Am Black*, a play performed by the Birmingham Repertory Company in England.

Other Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway plays in which Freeman appeared were: *Climate of Eden*, *Greener Grass*, *Agean Fable*, *Stevedore*, *The Philanderer*, and *Evening with Swans*. In the 1950s, Freeman directed several productions of *Anna Lucasta* in Great Britain. When he returned to the United States, he performed with or had affiliations with several organizations, including the Negro Opera Guild, New York Trade Show, Columbia Concert Bureau, and the Carnegie Recital Hall. He directed a number of plays, among them *The Bohemian Girl*, *Faust*, *Frankie and Johnny*, *Imoinda*, and *Blessed Are the Fruits*. He also directed performances of the Carib Singers, New Lafayette Players, and the Stanley Woolf Players.

Freeman's career included roles in films and television in: What a Guy (1947), Miracle In Harlem (1948), and in television shows: Phantom of Kenwood, the Nora Morales Show, Poppy Cannon Show, Pulitzer Playhouse, Naked City, Omnibus, Tonight In London, and Caribe Cruise (B. B. C. London).

In addition to acting and directing, Freeman wrote dramas and was a scenic and costume designer. Among the scripts he wrote are: *'Tis Cricket*, *Back Tu Me Mad*, *Tad*, *Imoinda*; and *Blessed Are the Fruits*. He designed the costumes and sets for *'Tis Cricket*, *Imoinda*, *Calypso Carnival*, *Cinderella*, *Theatre of the Soul*, as well as others. As a singer and dancer Freeman performed in nightclubs in the United States and Canada. He also gave concerts in New York, at universities and concert halls, and performed with the Negro Opera Guild. His repertoire included voice-overs for Ten Steps to the Gallows (London) and Bimina Baby (a vocal sound tract for Pathe Records).

Freeman was active in theatre-related organizations such as the Negro Actors Guild (historian), the Co-Ordination Council for Negro Performers (Secretary) and the Ira Aldridge Society (Public Relations Assistant). He held professional memberships with the British Actors' Equity Association, the Negro Actors Guild of America, Inc., the Screen Actors Guild, and the Actors' Equity Association. He was also active with the Harlem Cultural Council. During the formation of the New Lafayette Players in the 1940s, Freeman was part of the Interim Committee along with Dick Campbell (Chairman), Hilda Simms, Frederick O'Neal, Amil Brown, and others, and also served as a director of that group and contributed articles to its newsletter. Freeman was also drama critic and theatre columnist for the West Indian American newspaper.

In the 1980s due to ill health, Freeman became a resident of the Actors Fund Nursing Home in New Jersey.

Bee (Beatrice) Freeman was billed as "The Sepia Mae West," and worked in vaudeville, theatre, film, and nightclubs. She was married to Kenneth James Freeman and they resided in Boston until shortly after the birth of their son, Kenneth James Freeman, Jr. After Freeman, Jr. was born, the family relocated to New York City, where Freeman began her acting career.

After her arrival in New York City, although a novice to the theatre, Freeman was cast in the musical, *Shuffle Along* (1921). She had impressed the composer Eubie Blake and the lyricist Noble Sissle so much that they wrote a song for her: "If You've Never Been Vamped By a Brown-Skin Vamp." Freeman subsequently appeared in *Liza* (1922) *Runnin' Wild* (1923), *Ole Man Satan*, *Anna Lucasta* (1944) and *Dear Ruth* (1940s).

Her Off-Broadway and summer stock performances included roles in *Melinda*, *High Point*, *Carib*, and *Salt and Pepper*. Her performance in *Melinda* caught the eye of filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, who gave her character parts in his films including Lying Lips and The Underworld (1937),. She also appeared as a walk-on in a scene in the film, Emperor Jones (1933). Other films she was in include: Harlem After Midnight (1934) Lem Hawkins Confessions (1935), Temptation (1936), and The Phantom of Kenwood.

During World War II like many women Freeman found work in the war industry while she continued to perform in nightclubs. In the fifties her son produced *Anna Lucasta* in Great Britain and cast her in the role of Theresa, the mother. She was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1977. Freeman also volunteered to work with organizations whose primary goal was the betterment of actors' welfare. She served as executive secretary of the Negro Actors Guild and was a board member in 1982. After a long illness, Bee Freeman died in 1986.

## Scope and Content Note

The Kenn Freeman Papers consist of correspondence, programs, flyers, contracts, writings, scripts, sheet music, scrapbooks, and autograph albums. There are three series; Personal Papers, Professional Papers, and Family Papers. The collection contains information about his life before, during and after he began his career in the theatre. Correspondence between Kenn and Bee Freeman forms an important part of both the Personal Papers and Family Papers series. The bulk of the correspondence covers the years, 1937 to 1950, and was written primarily during the years Kenn was in the United States Navy or in England or when either Kenn or his mother were on tour with a production. The letters show the close personal and professional relationship between this mother and son.

Among Freeman's **PERSONAL PAPERS, 1937-1971 (.4 lin. ft.)** are various membership cards, his passport, and resume. His correspondence with his mother describes his activities in Great Britain including information regarding his fellow cast members in the *Anna Lucasta* productions. There is also information relating to the Department of Rent and Housing documenting his confrontations with that agency and his efforts to retain his mother's apartment following her death in 1986. Other materials in the collection include scrapbooks, a travel diary, and autograph albums. The autograph books are from his school years. The scrapbooks consist of articles, reviews of and programs for *Anna Lucasta*, photographs, telegrams, programs, sheet music, and letters from his admirers. These items are either pasted or taped to the pages in the scrapbook. Freeman's United States Navy scrapbook contains photocopies of postcards, flyers, invitations, menus, newspaper articles, greeting cards, Navy newsletters, and dried flowers he collected throughout his travels while in the service. The scrapbook has been photocopied and the original has been withdrawn from active use due to its condition. There is also a travel diary of the United States company tour of *Anna Lucasta*. The entries are primarily for the month of October and contain the addresses of hotels and individuals written in at the end of the book; probably of places where cast members were able to stay while touring with the company due to segregated public accommodations.

The **PROFESSIONAL PAPERS, 1936-1988 (1.2 lin. ft.)** series is divided into five subseries: ***Anna Lucasta, Writings, Cultural Organizations, Programs and Flyers***, and **Scripts**. The majority of materials document his various roles in ***Anna Lucasta, 1936-1986*** (2 1/2 inches) while he was in Great Britain, 1947 to 1949, and the national tour of the play in the United States. The contents include contracts, programs and playbills, and an itinerary for the United States tour of *Anna Lucasta*. Play scripts written by Freeman can be found in the **Writings, 1961, n.d.** (2 inches) subseries and include *'Tis Cricket* (a revue) and *Imoinda* (a play), both of which he directed. Freeman also wrote articles for *Pillbox*, a newsletter and *The Pepper Pot*, a narrative-like script. The **Cultural Organizations, 1949-1987** (2 inches) subseries is arranged alphabetically, and contains handbooks, flyers, form letters, constitution, newsletters, programs, membership cards, ballot, by-laws, and minutes that document Freeman's activities with theatre and cultural groups established to improve the welfare of African-American actors and artists.

**Programs and Flyers, 1936-1981** (1/2 inch) acquired by Freeman and his mother form a significant part of the collection and have been placed here as it was not always clear who had acquired the item. Among copies of the **Scripts, n.d.** (4 1/2 inches) are: plays by Townsend Brewster and Cliff Mason, Garson Kanin's *The Rat Race*, Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope*, and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The scripts are arranged in alphabetical order according to the last name of the scriptwriter or by title when the scriptwriter is unknown.

**FAMILY PAPERS, 1930-1980** (.4 lin. ft.) series primarily consists of letters to Bee Freeman from Kenn, during his service in the United States Navy. There is information on Freeman, her career, and her activities while her son was serving in World War II. Scripts for Oscar Micheaux's Lying Lips and Norman Krasna's *Dear Ruth*, in which Bee Freeman appeared, can be found here. The series also includes documentation on Kenneth Freeman, Sr.; his death certificate and an honorable discharge record from the United States Army, dated 1918.

Provenance

The papers were acquired after Kenn Freeman was taken to a nursing home. Friends called the Schomburg Center and staff members were given access to the apartment where they sorted and packed all relevant materials.

SCM88-62

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April 2001

Box	Folder	
1**		PERSONAL PAPERS
	1	Biographical Information Correspondence
	2	1937-1943
	3-6	1944
	7	1945
	8	1945-1946
	9	1947-1949
	10	1950s, 1960s
	11	1980s, n.d.
		* Scrapbooks and Autographed Albums
	12	Drama Instruction Notes
	13	Department of Rent and Housing, 1963-1971
		PROFESSIONAL PAPERS
		<i>Anna Lucasta</i>
	14	Contracts, 1946-1958
	15	Route Sheet Programs
	16	1936-1946
	17	1947
	18	1949-1954
	19	1986; n.d.
	20	Contracts, 1955-1958 Writings
	21	Drafts
	22	<u>The Pillbox</u> – Newsletter
	23-24	Scripts
	25-26	Scripts - Drafts

\*See Box 3

\*\*Offsite



Box	Folder	
1		Cultural Organizations
	27	General
	28	The Afro-American Guild of Performing Artists, Inc.
	29	Harlem Cultural Council
		Negro Actors Guild of America, Inc.
	30	1949-1980
	31	1953-1982
	32	University Art Show Committee
	33	Various Organizations – Minutes of Meetings - Fragments
2**		Programs and Flyers
	1	1936-1949
	2	1950-1988; n.d.
		Scripts
	3	Brewster, Townsend T. . <i>Rudens</i> - Gerstenberg, Alice . <i>Potboilers</i>
	4	Kanin, Garson . <i>The Rat Race</i>
	5	Lee, Virginia . <i>Holiday for Pi-Te</i> . Lindsay, Powell . <i>Jungle</i>
	6	Martens, Frederick M . <i>Schwanda</i> - Mason, Clifford . <i>Sister Sadie and The Sons of Sam</i>
	7	Peterson, Ralph W. . <i>The Square Ring</i>
	8	Sackler, Howard . <i>The Great White Hope</i>
	9	Williams, Tennessee . <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i> . Willis, Sr., Noxley Waldo . <i>Born Unto Trouble</i>
		Other Titles
	10	<i>A Minuet – Pyramus and Thisbe</i> - <i>Stoole Pigeon</i>
	11	<i>Too Hard the Accolades</i> - <i>The Youngest</i>
	12	Printed Materials

\*\*Offsite

Box	Folder		
2**	13	Manuscript Music	
	14	Sheet Music	
		FAMILY PAPERS	
	15	Bee Freeman	
		Correspondence	
	16	1930s	
	17	1943-1945	
	18	1945	
	19	1946	
	20	1947	
	21	1948	
	22	1948-1949	
	23	1950s	
	24	1960s, 1970s	
	25	1980s; n.d	
	26	Contracts	
		Scripts	
	27	Krasna, Norman - <i>Dear Ruth</i> . Micheaux, Oscar - <i>Lying Lips</i>	
	28	Kenneth Freeman, Sr. - Biographical Information	
	29	Postcards, n.d.	
	3	Scrapbooks and Autograph Albums	

\*\*Offsite

SEPARATION RECORD

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers Kenn Freeman Papers

Accession Number SCM 88-62

Date received: December 1988

Date transferred: December 2000

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

**Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:**

Box of photographs and negatives

**Schomburg Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division:**

Phonograph records, 33 1/3 and 45 rpm

**Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Division:**

Sheet Music and programs transferred to Sheet Music and Program and Playbill Collections respectively