Guide to the Walter Abel Papers, 1900-1976

*T-Mss 1993-050

Billy Rose Theatre Division

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Walter Abel Papers.

Collection ID: *T-Mss 1993-050

Creator: Abel, Walter, 1898-1987

Extent: 4 boxes and 4 volumes


Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open to the public. Photocopying prohibited. Advance notification may be required.

Biographical Note

An actor on stage, film, radio, and television, Walter Abel's career spanned sixty years. He was born on June 6, 1898 in St. Paul, Minnesota to Richard Michael Abel and Christine Becker Abel and studied for the stage at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City, 1917-1918. He made his first professional appearance in the 1918 film Out of a Clear Sky, and his Broadway debut in Dorothy Donnelly's Forbidden at the Manhattan Opera House in 1919.

His early career was on the New York stage where he was steadily employed through the 1920s and 1930s appearing in among others, William Shakespeare's As You Like It (1923), Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms (1924), William Congreve's Love for Love (1925), Channing Pollack's The Enemy (1925), Anton Chekhov's The Seagull (1929-1930), O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra (1932), Rachel Crother's When Ladies Meet (1932), and George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's Merrily We Roll Along (1934). In 1929 he made his London debut in Coquette by George Abbott and Ann Preston Bridgers.

His film career took off in 1935 when he starred as D'Artagnan in The Three Musketeers. He subsequently appeared in over sixty films, usually in supporting roles, often playing district attorneys or harrassed fathers. Films include Fury, We Went to College, Arise My Love, Hold Back the Dawn, Beyond the Blue Horizon, Holiday Inn, Mr. Skeffington, Kiss and Tell, Skylark, So This Is Love, Raintree County and others. His final picture, filmed in 1983, released in 1985, was Grace Quigley starring Katharine Hepburn and Nick Nolte.

Following World War II, Abel returned to Broadway and was seen in John Van Druten's The Mermaids Singing (1945), William McLeery's The Parlor Story (1947), Joshua Logan's The Wisteria Tree with Helen Hayes (1952), Samuel Taylor's The Pleasure of His Company (1958) and Eduardo de Filippo's Saturday Sunday Monday (1974). He toured Europe in 1949 as Claudius in the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA)'s production of Hamlet. His final New York stage appearance was in a 1975 revival of Arthur Pinero's Trelawny of the 'Wells'.

Beginning in the 1950s, Abel was often a concert narrator or reader. He said at the time that the two theatrical experiences he prized most were with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy in Aaron Copeland's Portrait of Lincoln (1951), and Arthur Honegger's King David (1952). He was also a reader in Dylan Thomas' Under Milkwood in 1953.

Abel was active in many professional theatrical associations, serving as a council member of Actors' Equity, a vice president of the Screen Actors' Guild and of the Episcopal Actors Guild, a member of the board of ANTA (1961-1973), and its president...
Through ANTA he visited colleges and universities, lecturing and acting in and directing plays.


**Scope and Content Note**

The papers of Walter Abel consist primarily of correspondence, contracts, speeches and clippings documenting his work as an actor. The professional correspondence is not extensive: the bulk is single letters received from a wide variety of individuals, much of it letters of thanks. A few outgoing letters discuss proposed productions. Correspondents include John Golden, Robert Edmond Jones and Eugene Ormandy. The contracts file is incomplete. Speeches, the largest series, are for the most part lectures on Shakespeare, theater history, and the psychology of acting, but include some personal anecdotes. They reflect his tireless work promoting the theater to college students and others. The best depiction of his life in the theater can be gleaned from the box of clippings of production reviews and interviews with Abel. Production materials are mostly miscellaneous single items such as call sheets and schedules from films in which Abel appeared. Organizational work consists of minutes and correspondence pertaining to his work with ANTA, the Hollywood Victory Committee and other war service organizations. The collection also contains personal material on his family, awards, and a few scrapbooks of photographs.
Organization

- Series I: Family Papers
- Series II: Correspondence
- Series III: Contracts
- Series IV: Production Materials
- Series V: Organizational Work
- Series VI: Speeches
- Series VII: Writings
- Series VIII: Clippings
- Series IX: Awards
- Series X: Ephemera
- Series XI: Scrapbooks

Series Descriptions/Container List

**Series I: Family papers, 1900-1975.**
8 folders

By type and chronological

Consists of letters (1916-1922) from his mother and his sister when Abel was away at school and just starting out in New York, papers of his brother Alfred who died in 1922 from tuberculosis contracted while serving overseas in World War I, a few legal documents, and some letters (1938-1975) from his wife when he was on the road. There is a small amount of correspondence to his wife and of outgoing personal letters by Walter Abel.

b. 1 f. 1 Family correspondence, 1916-1922.
1 folder
Family correspondence to Walter Abel. Includes letters from his mother and his sister when Abel was away at school and just starting out in New York.

b. 1 f. 2 Papers and correspondence / Alfred J. Abel, 1917-1922.
1 folder
Papers of Walter Abel's brother Alfred Abel, who served overseas during World War I.

b. 1 f. 3 Family legal documents, 1900-1975.
1 folder
Abel family legal documents.

b. 1 f. 4 Correspondence / Marietta Bitter, 1938-1975 and n.d.
Series II: Correspondence, 1918-1975.
27 folders

Incoming letters alphabetical by correspondent, followed by outgoing letters, then incoming telegrams and finally cards from unidentified correspondents.

Correspondence consists of letters concerning productions; agents; arrangements for speaking engagements and concert narrations, particularly with the Philadelphia Orchestra; work with the American National Theatre and Academy and the Hospital Committee of the American Theatre Wing; thank you letters for work in war savings campaigns in the U.S. and Canada and entertaining hospitalized veterans after the war; participation in various radio programs; fan mail, especially after his performance in *The Three Musketeers*; and telegrams of opening night congratulations. There are a few letters from celebrity colleagues and a small amount of outgoing correspondence mostly pertaining to proposed productions.

b. 1 f. 9 Correspondence "A-B", 1936-1957 and n.d.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

b. 1 f. 10 Correspondence "C", 1935-1966.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

b. 1 f. 11 Correspondence / Morris Carnovsky.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folder</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Correspondence &quot;D-F&quot;, 1919-1974.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Correspondence / Kirk Douglas, 1955.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Correspondence / Dwight D. (Dwight David) Eisenhower, 1948.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Correspondence / Ruth Ford.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Correspondence &quot;G-H&quot;, 1918-1973.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Correspondence / John Golden, 1929-1933.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Correspondence / Ruth Gordon, 1974.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Correspondence / Helen Hayes, 1951 and n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Correspondence &quot;J-L&quot;, 1935-1975 and n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Correspondence / Robert Edmond Jones, 1924-1948 and n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Correspondence "M-O", 1926-1975.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

Correspondence / Laurence Olivier, 1946.
1 folder
Letter to Walter Abel.

Correspondence / Eugene Ormandy, 1951-1953.
1 folder
Correspondence of Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra
Association with Walter Abel.

1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

Correspondence / Joseph Papp, 1975.
Letter to Walter Abel.

Correspondence / Richard Rodgers.
1 folder
Card [undated] to Walter Abel.

Correspondence / Franklin D. (Franklin Delano) Roosevelt, 1936.
1 folder
Telegram to Walter Abel.

Correspondence "S", 1918-1968.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

Correspondence "T-Z", 1929-1963.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

Unidentified correspondence, 1918-1974 and n.d.
1 folder
Correspondence to Walter Abel.

Outgoing professional correspondence / Walter Abel, 1948-1964.
1 folder

Outgoing professional correspondence / Walter Abel.
1 folder
Drafts of letters [undated; incomplete] by Walter Abel about a
proposed production of *Under Milkwood* by Dylan Thomas.
b. 1  f.  Telegrams to Walter Abel, 1923-1974 and n.d.
34  1 folder
Telegrams received by Walter Abel.

b. 1  f.  Unidentified cards, 1941 and n.d.
35  1 folder
Unidentified cards received by Walter Abel.
4 folders

Chronological

Consists of Actors' Equity Association and other contracts for some of the productions in which Abel appeared.

b. 2 f. 1  Miscellaneous contracts, 1921-1936.
1 folder
Contracts of Walter Abel.

b. 2 f. 2  Miscellaneous contracts, 1944-1949.
1 folder
Contracts of Walter Abel.

b. 2 f. 3  Miscellaneous contracts, 1951-1959.
1 folder
Contracts of Walter Abel.

1 folder
Contracts of Walter Abel.

Series IV: Production Materials, 1935-1958 and n.d. 9 folders

Alphabetical by production title

Production materials are mostly miscellaneous single items such as call sheets and schedules from films in which Abel appeared. There are a few financial records and one actor's side from a play.

b. 2 f. 5  *Holiday Inn* (Motion picture), 1941.
1 folder
Call sheets for the motion picture *Holiday Inn*.

b. 2 f. 6  *Inherit the wind* / Jerome Lawrence, 1958.
1 folder
Box office statements for the play *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee.

b. 2 f. 7  *Little screwball* / Walt Anderson, 1951.
1 folder
Production materials: statistics for *The Little Screwball*. 
b. 2 f. 8  
*Merrily we roll along* / George S. (George Simon) Kaufman.  
1 folder  
Production materials: side [n.d.] for *Merrily We Roll Along*.

b. 2 f. 9  
*Raintree County* (Motion picture), 1957.  
1 folder  
Makeup schedule for the motion picture *Raintree County*.

b. 2 f. 10  
*Saturday Sunday Monday* / Eduardo De Filippo.  
1 folder  
Production materials: contact sheet [n.d.] for *Saturday Sunday Monday*.

b. 2 f. 11  
*The three musketeers* (Motion picture : 1935).  
1 folder  
Shooting schedule and call sheet for the motion picture *The Three Musketeers*.

b. 2 f. 12  
*Two o'clock courage* (Motion picture), 1935.  
1 folder  
Production materials: call sheet for *Two O'clock Courage*.

b. 2 f. 13  
Production materials.  
1 folder  
Notes [n.d.] of Walter Abel for unidentified productions.

**Series V: Organizational Work, 1942-1968.**  
3 folders

A small file of minutes, correspondence and other papers from a few of the organizations with which Abel was involved: The American College Theater Festival, ANTA, the Hollywood Victory Committee, and other war service organizations during World War II.

b. 2 f. 14  
Minutes / American College Theater Festival, 1968.  
1 folder  
Organizational work of Walter Abel.

b. 2 f. 15  
Records / ANTA (Organization), 1968.  
1 folder  
Organizational work of Walter Abel.

b. 2 f. 16  
Correspondence and other papers on war work / Walter Abel, 1942-1945 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Correspondence and other papers of Walter Abel.
Series VI: Speeches, 1944-1974. 26 folders

Chronological

A large file of handwritten drafts of speeches Abel gave at colleges and elsewhere, many under the auspices of ANTA, predominately in the 1960s. They are primarily on Shakespeare, theater history, and the psychology of acting, though they do contain some personal anecdotes that illuminate his life in the theater.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 17</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1944. 1 folder Speeches in Canada by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 20</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1948. 1 folder Speech on American Theatre Wing by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 21</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1948. 1 folder Speech at Union College by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 22</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1952. 1 folder Speeches by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 23</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1959. 1 folder Speeches by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 24</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1960. 1 folder Speeches by Walter Abel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 25</td>
<td>Speeches / Walter Abel, 1960. 1 folder Speech by Walter Abel at Scarsdale Co. Theatre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b. 3 f. 1  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1962.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 2  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1964.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 3  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1965.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 4  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1966.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 5  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1966.
1 folder
Speech, "The Professional Actor, 1966" by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 6  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1967-1968.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 7  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1969.
1 folder
Speech by Walter Abel at Kent College.

b. 3 f. 8  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1969.
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel in Minnesota.

b. 3 f. 9  Speeches / Walter Abel.
1 folder
Poem read by Walter Abel at the Minnesota Historical Society Centennial.

b. 3 f. 10  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1969.
1 folder
Speech given by Walter Abel in Philadelphia.

b. 3 f. 11  Speeches / Walter Abel, ca. 1960s
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f. 12  Speeches / Walter Abel, ca. 1960s
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.
b. 3 f.  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1970.
13
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

14
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

15
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f.  Speeches / Walter Abel, 1974.
16
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

b. 3 f.  Speeches / Walter Abel.
17
1 folder
Speeches by Walter Abel.

2 folders
A very small series consisting of a draft of an Equity survey of the theater, ca. 1965, and miscellaneous writings by others included with the Walter Abel Papers.

b. 3 f.  Writings / Walter Abel.
18
1 folder

b. 3 f.  Miscellaneous writings by others, 1929 and n.d.
19
1 folder
Manuscripts found in the Walter Abel Papers.
1 box

Alphabetical by production title; by subject

The clippings are predominately reviews of productions Abel was in. There are also general interviews with Abel, and articles about his readings, speeches, radio and theatrical promotion work. There are two Letters to the Editor by Abel and one folder of clippings and programs of his wife, the harpist Marietta Bitter.

b. 4 f. 1  
_Arise my love_ (Motion picture), 1940-1941 and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings and program on Walter Abel in _Arise My Love_ (Motion picture).

b. 4 f. 2  
_At the bottom_ / Maksim Gorky, 1930 and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _At the Bottom_.

b. 4 f. 3  
_Beyond the blue horizon_ (Motion picture), 1942.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _Beyond the Blue Horizon_ (Motion picture).

b. 4 f. 4  
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _The Biggest Thief in Town_.

b. 4 f. 5  
_Birds stop singing_ / Lenore Coffee, 1939 and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _The Birds Stop Singing_.

b. 4 f. 6  
_Caesar and Cleopatra_ / Bernard Shaw, 1958 and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _Caesar and Cleopatra_.

b. 4 f. 7  
_Conflict of interest_ / Jay Broad, 1972 and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _A Conflict of Interest_.

b. 4 f. 8  
_Drums begin_ / Howard Irving Young, 1933.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in _The Drums Begin_.

b. 4 f. 9  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Emerald Staircase*.

**Fury (Motion picture), 1936 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture *Fury*.

**Hamlet / William Shakespeare, 1949 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Hamlet in Denmark*.

**Hangman's house / Willard Mack, 1926 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Hangman's House*.

**Hold back the dawn (Motion picture), 1941 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture *Hold Back the Dawn*.

**Imaginary invalid / Moliere, 1964 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings and programs on Walter Abel in *The Imaginary Invalid*.

**In the matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer / Heinar Kipphardt, 1969**
and n.d.
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*.

**Inherit the wind / Jerome Lawrence, 1958 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Inherit the Wind*.

**Invitation to a murder / Rufus King, 1934.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Invitation to a Murder*.

**Jailer's wench / Edwin Justus Mayer, 1948 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Jailer's Wench*.

**King David / Arthur Honegger, 1952 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *King David*.

**Lady's not for burning / Christopher Fry, 1952 and n.d.**
1 folder
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Lady's Not for Burning*.

b. 4 f.  
*Little screwball* / Walt Anderson, 1951.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Little Screwball*.

b. 4 f.  
*Long watch* / Morrie Ryskind, 1952.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Long Watch*.

b. 4 f.  
*Mermaids singing* / John Van Druten, 1945 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Mermaids Singing*.

b. 4 f.  
*Merrily we roll along* / George S. (George Simon) Kaufman, 1934 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Merrily We Roll Along*.

b. 4 f.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

b. 4 f.  
*Mr. Grant* (Motion picture), 1935 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Mr. Grant*, a motion picture that was never produced.

b. 4 f.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *The Ninety-Day Mistress*.

b. 4 f.  
*Parlor story* / William McCleery, 1947 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Parlor Story*.

b. 4 f.  
*Portia on trial* (Motion picture), 1937 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture *Portia on Trial*.

b. 4 f.  
*Raintree County* (Motion picture), 1957 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture *Raintree County*.

b. 4 f.  
*Saturday Sunday Monday* / Eduardo De Filippo, 1974 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in *Saturday Sunday Monday*. 
b. 4 f.  
Sea gull / Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, 1930 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in The Sea Gull.

b. 4 f.  
The show-off / George Kelly.  
1 folder  

b. 4 f.  
Skylark (Motion picture), 1941-1942 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture Skylark.

b. 4 f.  
So this is love (Motion picture), 1953 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture So This Is Love.

b. 4 f.  
The three musketeers (Motion picture : 1935), 1936.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture The Three Musketeers.

b. 4 f.  
1 folder  
Clippings and other printed matter on Walter Abel in Under Milkwood.

b. 4 f.  
We went to college (Motion picture), 1936.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in the motion picture We Went to College.

b. 4 f.  
West of Broadway / Marguerite Roberts, 1939 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in West of Broadway.

b. 4 f.  
When ladies meet / Rachel Crothers, 1932-1933 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in When Ladies Meet.

b. 4 f.  
Wisteria trees / Joshua Logan, 1950 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel in The Wisteria Tree.

b. 4 f.  
1 folder  
Clippings and other printed matter on Walter Abel in various college and university productions.
Clippings / Walter Abel, 1924-1975 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Single clippings and other printed matter on Walter Abel in various productions.

Clippings / Walter Abel, 1934-1975 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings about Walter Abel.

Clippings / Walter Abel, 1934-1947 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings about Walter Abel in Hollywood.

1 folder  
Clippings about Walter Abel and ANTA.

Clippings / Walter Abel, 1951-1973 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings and other printed matter on concert narrations and theatrical readings by Walter Abel.

Clippings / Walter Abel, 1947-1953 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings on Walter Abel's radio broadcasts.

1 folder  
Clippings and other printed matter on Walter Abel's speaking engagements.

1 folder  
Clippings on theatrical promotion work by Walter Abel.

Letters to the editor / Walter Abel, 1936-1945.  
1 folder  
Letters to the Editor by Walter Abel.

Clippings and programs / Marietta Bitter, 1926-1939 and n.d.  
1 folder  
Clippings and programs pertaining to the career of Marietta Bitter Abel.

1 folder  
Consists of one folder of awards, mostly non-theatrical.
Awards / Walter Abel, 1941-1958 and n.d.
1 folder
Awards received by Walter Abel.

1 folder
One folder of miscellany.

1 folder
Ephemera of Walter Abel.

4 volumes
Four scrapbooks contain mainly photographs and clippings of Walter Abel.

Scrapbooks / Walter Abel, 1917.
1 box
Photographs [1917 and before] of Walter Abel and members of his family in Minnesota.

Scrapbooks / Walter Abel, Mar. 1955.
1 box
Scrapbook of photographs of Walter Abel with a letter of thanks for his performance in Bell, Book and Candle, the opening production for the Stamford Playhouse (CT).

Scrapbooks / Walter Abel, 1926-1932.
1 box
Scrapbook on Walter Abel.

Scrapbooks / Walter Abel, 1938-1948.
1 box
Scrapbook on Walter and Marietta Bitter Abel.