

Ralph Chessé papers, 1935-1975, C0224

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Title Statement

Ralph Chessé papers, 1935-1975, C0224

Subtitle: Ralph Chessé

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Publication Statement

Publisher: George Mason University. Libraries. Special Collections Research Center

Fenwick Library, MS2FL
4400 University Dr.
Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Business Number: 703-993-2220
Fax Number: 703-993-8911
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URL: <https://scrc.gmu.edu>



September 2012

Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-04-08 07:03:04 -0400.

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

C0224

Unit ID

/repositories/2/resources/342

Unit Date

1935-1975

Language

English

Abstract

The Chessé papers contain materials such as photographs, watercolor set and costume design sketches, playscripts, and programs relating to Federal Theatre Project marionette productions in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Some of these plays are Child of God, Crock of Gold, The Emperor Jones, Hansel and Gretel, Marionette Varieties, Rip Van Winkle, The Tempest, and Twelfth Night. The papers also include magazine articles from the 1970s that highlight Chessé's mural painting at the Coit Tower in San Francisco.

Creator

Chessé, Ralph

Extent

1.25 Linear Feet 1.5 boxes, 1 flat box

Repository

George Mason University. Libraries. Special Collections Research Center

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no access restrictions.

Use Restrictions

The copyright and related rights status of this collection have not been evaluated (See <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/CNE/1.0/>)

Acquisition Information

Donated to the Special Collections Research Center by Ralph Chesse on July 8, 1977; July 24, 1980; May 18, 1981.

Processing Information

Processed and EAD completed by Greta Kuriger Suiter in September 2012.

Preferred Citation note

Ralph Chessé papers, C0224, Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University Libraries.

Biographical note

Ralph Chessé was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on January 6, 1900. He attended schools in New Orleans and Chicago including the Chicago Art Institute, but was primarily a self-taught painter. In 1924 he traveled to San Francisco where he met the puppeteer Blanding Sloan. It was after this meeting that Chessé began working as a puppeteer. In 1929 he opened his first puppet theatre, The Marionette Guild on Merchant Street. In 1934 Chessé was selected, with a mural design titled "Playground", as one of 26 artists by the Works Progress Administration to paint a wall fresco inside of Coit Tower. During this same year The Marionette Guild had to close due to lack of funds.

Chessé joined the Federal Theatre project in 1936 as Director of the Puppetry Unit. There he oversaw a crew of 17 people. Their first production was The Crock of Gold in 1936. Other early productions included The Mikado, Alice in Wonderland, A Marionette Variety Show, and Emperor Jones.

The Federal Theatre Project was a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided employment for large numbers of artists, writers, and performers during the Great Depression (1929-1939). The Federal Theatre began in 1935 and, until its end in 1939, flourished as the first and only federally sponsored and subsidized theater program in the United States. Directed by Hallie Flanagan (1880-1969), it was a way for theatrical professionals to gain employment during the Depression. Jobs were provided for many people, including actors, playwrights, scene designers, scene builders, seamstresses, lighting experts, ushers, box-office men, and stagehands.

In 1937 Chessé moved to Los Angeles to take over as State Director for California. This was a larger unit employing 50 people. He remained in Los Angeles until 1939 though was still in communication with activities in San Francisco. In Los Angeles productions included Rip Van Winkle, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and a Variety Show. On June 30th 1939 the puppetry unit received notice that the Federal Theatre Project had been terminated. Also in 1939 Chessé brought marionettes to the World's Fair held in San Francisco.

After work finished with the FTP Chessé moved his family back to San Francisco and had a long and successful career that included various jobs. At different points in his life Chessé made a living by teaching puppetry for adult education classes at San Francisco State College, producing a children's television program called The Wonderful World of Brother Buzz, making puppets for TV, theatre, and opera, and acting

in plays and films. In 1984 he moved to Ashland, Oregon where he was an avid painter up until his death in 1991.

Scope and Content

The Chessé papers contain materials such as photographs, watercolor set and costume design sketches, playscripts, and programs relating to Federal Theatre Project marionette productions in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Some of these plays are Child of God, Crock of Gold, The Emperor Jones, Hansel and Gretel, Marionette Varieties, Rip Van Winkle, The Tempest, and Twelfth Night. The papers also include magazine articles from the 1970s that highlight Chessé's mural painting at the Coit Tower in San Francisco.

Related Material

The Works Progress Administration oral histories collection, the Federal Theatre Project collection, the Federal Theatre Project photograph collection, as well as numerous other personal papers.

Keywords

Puppet theater
Theater -- United States
New Deal, 1933-1939
Federal Theatre Project (U.S.)
Chessé, Ralph
Federal Theatre Project (San Francisco, Calif.)
Federal Theatre Project (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Alternative Form Available

Digitized photographs from this collection can be found in the [Federal Theatre Project collection](#).

Arrangement

Arranged alphabetically by title.

Description of Subordinate Components

Ralph Chessé papers

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86060

Unit Date 1935-1975

Child of God costume designs,

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86061

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 1 (folder)

Scope and Content

8 items

Child of God playscript

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86062

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 2 (folder)

Child of God set designs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86063

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 3 (folder)

Scope and Content

4 items

City of San Francisco magazine

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86064

Unit Date February 4, 1976

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 2 (folder)

Scope and Content

Includes article with section about Chessé "The WPA and the great Coit Tower controversy: The artists look back".

Crock of Gold photographs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86065

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 4 (folder)

Scope and Content

8 photographs

Crock of Gold

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86066

Unit Date March 1936

Crock of Gold

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86067

Unit Date March 1936

Crock of Gold playscript

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86068

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 5 (folder)

Scope and Content

photocopy

Crock of Gold set design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86069

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 7 (folder)

Scope and Content

5 items

The Cue volume I number II

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86070

Unit Date August 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 6 (folder)

Scope and Content

Includes interview with Ralph Chessé.

The Emperor Jones playbill

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86071

Unit Date circa 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 7 (folder)

The Emperor Jones photograph

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86072

Unit Date 1937

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 1 (folder)

The Emperor Jones set design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86073

Unit Date circa 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 8 (folder)

Scope and Content

3 items

The Farmer's wife playbill

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86074

Unit Date circa 1936-1939

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 9 (folder)

The Federal Show Parade volume I number II

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86075

Unit Date May 10, 1938

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 10 (folder)

Scope and Content

photocopy

Hamlet costume design; Hansel and Gretel set design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86076

Unit Date 1926; circa 1936-1939

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 11 (folder)

Scope and Content

Four items, Hamlet costume design is photocopy, set designs are watercolors

Help Yourself playbill

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86077

Unit Date April 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 12 (folder)

Hula group marionettes photograph

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86078

Unit Date 1938

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 13 (folder)

It Can't Happen Here newspaper clipping

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86079

Unit Date October 19, 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 14 (folder)

Los Angeles marionette theatre photographs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86080

Unit Date 1938

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 15 (folder)

Scope and Content

Four photographs - two of traveling stage with curtain drawn; two of audience.

Marionette band photograph

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86081

Unit Date circa 1936-1939

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 16 (folder)

Marionette crew of San Francisco

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86082

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 17 (folder)

Scope and Content

2 photographs

Marionette personnel

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86083

Unit Date circa 1936-1939

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 18 (folder)

Marionette stage design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86084

Unit Date circa 1936-1939

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 8 (folder)

Marionette Varieties San Francisco production

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86085

Unit Date July 1936; 1938

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 19 (folder)

Scope and Content

27 photographs

The Marriage Proposal

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86086

Unit Date July 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 20 (folder)

Scope and Content

2 photographs

The murals in Coit Tower

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86087

Unit Date December 14, 1975

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 3 (folder)

Scope and Content

article in San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle

Penguin Island costume design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86088

Unit Date 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 21 (folder)

Scope and Content

12 items

A puppeteer's guide

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86089

Unit Date circa 1935-1939

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 22 (folder)

R. U. R. costume designs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86090

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 23 (folder)

Scope and Content

8 items

R. U. R. script for marionettes

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86091

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 24 (folder)

R. U. R. set designs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86092

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 5 (folder)

Scope and Content

3 items

Rip Van Winkle Los Angeles marionette production

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86093

Unit Date 1936

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 25 (folder)

Scope and Content

4 photographs

San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle: Conversation with a puppeteer

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86094

Unit Date April 28, 1974

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 26 (folder)

Schedule of productions

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86095

Unit Date 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 27 (folder)

Sherlock Holmes

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86096

Unit Date 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 28 (folder)

Scope and Content

Photocopy of script; photographs of marionette performance.

Snow White script

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86097

Unit Date circa 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 29 (folder)

The Tempest

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86098

Unit Date undated

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 30 (folder)

Scope and Content

Color slides of set and costume design sketches for The Tempest.

The Tempest costume designs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86099

Unit Date 1935; 1937

Mixed Materials 1 (box)

Container 31 (folder)

Scope and Content

17 items

The Tempest set designs

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86100

Unit Date 1935

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 4 (folder)

Scope and Content

3 items

They walked with beauty: Gauguin, Cezanne, Van Gogh

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86101

Unit Date August 1-September 5, 1938

Mixed Materials 2 (box)

Container 1 (folder)

Scope and Content

4 radioscripts

Twelfth Night San Francisco marionette production

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86102

Unit Date 1938

Mixed Materials 2 (box)

Container 2 (folder)

Scope and Content

4 photographs

Twelfth Night costume design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86103

Unit Date 1937

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 9 (folder)

Twelfth Night set design

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86104

Unit Date circa 1937-1938

Mixed Materials 3 (box)

Container 6 (folder)

World's Fair

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/86105

Unit Date 1939

Mixed Materials 2 (box)

Container 3 (folder)

Scope and Content

Two photographs of Chessé demonstrating how marionettes work to two women.