



# **HARRY LANDIS UNITY THEATRE COLLECTION**

**(LANDIS)**

## **LANDIS Harry Landis Unity Theatre Collection 1946-2021**

**Name of Creator:** Unity Theatre; Harry Landis

**Extent:** 1 Box

**Administrative/Biographical History:** Unity Theatre grew out of the agitprop street theatre in the East End of London in the early 1930s lasting until it was destroyed by fire in 1975.

Once established, in a converted chapel in Kings Cross (built entirely with voluntary labour), Unity became the inspiration for a national upsurge in drama on social and political issues, since it was the only theatre in London throughout the 1930's, 1940's and early 1950's producing plays on these subjects.

Alongside shows specially created for Unity, it drew on the repertoire of world theatre, including innovative productions of works by Clifford Odets, Sean O'Casey, Lope de Vega, Jean Paul Sartre and Arthur Adamov. It was the first theatre in England to stage a play by Bertolt Brecht and it helped popularise the plays of Maxim Gorky.

Unity's strength lay with its audience drawn mainly from the trades unions and organised labour movements, but amongst its supporters were many eminent personalities e.g. Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Sybil Thorndike, Beatrix Lehmann and Paul Robeson whose appearance with Unity, followed by international acclaim for the political pantomime *Babes in the Wood*, marked the peak of the theatre's fame.

With the outbreak of war, Unity was the first theatre to open in London once the ban on public entertainment had been lifted and it maintained a permanent repertory of plays, satirical revues and musicals throughout the five years of hostilities. It also sent out small groups of performers who, often in hazardous conditions, provided valuable shelter and factory entertainment for those winning the war at home.

Unity emerged from the war at the head of a national drama movement that was concerned with the lives of working people. Soon however, many of the developments pioneered by Unity, such as vernacular drama, *Living Newspaper* and biting satirical shows, were accepted by the theatrical mainstream and television.

Many well-known theatre people - Lionel Bart, Alfie Bass, Michael Gambon, Bob Hoskins, David Kossoff, Warren Mitchell, Bill Owen and Ted Willis among them - learned their skills at this influential theatre which was the working people's most sustained and successful contribution to British drama and one of the most important and enduring initiatives in popular culture this century.

**Custodial History:** Deposited with Bishopsgate Institute by Harry Landis, October 2021.

**Scope and Content:** Papers regarding Unity Theatre. Includes programmes, press reviews and press releases, correspondence, and photographs, newsletters, publicity materials collected by Harry Landis, [1946-2021]

**System of Arrangement:**

No further arrangement required.

**Language/scripts of material:**

English

**Access conditions:**

OPEN

**Copying conditions:**

Photocopying, scanning and digital photography (without flash) is permitted for research purposes on completion of the Library's Copyright Declaration form and with respect to current UK copyright law.

**Finding Aids:**

Copy of handlist available in researcher's area.

**Rules and Conventions:**

Compiled in compliance with General International Standard Archival Description, ISAD(G), second edition, 2000; National Council on Archives Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names, 1997.

Programmes, press cutting and photograph regarding the Unity Theatre, as collected by actor Harry Landis, [1946-1990]

Includes:

- framed press cutting of article 'When Chamberlain was furious at Unity Theatre panto', written by Harry Landis (The Record, October 1990)
- black-and-white photograph of the cast of a production of 'Juno and the Paycock' by Sean O'Casey. Harry Landis is seated in the front row, second from the right, (1946)
- programmes (chiefly from the 1960s and 1970s) for productions of plays, musicals and pantomimes including: 'South Africa 70' (Paul Tomlinson); 'Barrier Across Europe' (Eric Paice); 'Nekrassov' (Jean-Paul Sartre); 'Squaring the Circle' (Valentin Kataev); 'Inherit the Wind' (Jerome Lawrence and Robert E Lee); 'The Country Wife' (William Wycherley); 'The Deviates' (Don Matthews); 'The Big Win' (Sholem Aleichem); 'It's Ours: a gala music hall performance to mark the purchase of Unity Theatre by its members' (May, 1964); 'The Frogs' (Aristophanes); 'Summer Folk' (Maxim Gorky); 'Mother Courage' (Bertolt Brecht); 'The Seagull' (Anton Chekhov); 'Chicken Soup with Barley' (Arnold Wesker); 'The Good Woman of Szechuan' (Brecht); 'Androcles and the Lion' (George Bernard Shaw); 'All My Sons' (Arthur Miller); 'The Offshore Island' (Marghanita Laski); 'Saint Joan of the Stockyards' (Brecht)
- printed sheet music and lyrics to 'The Song of the Appeal' [for Unity Theatre fundraising], words and music by Jack Cooper
- booklet, 'Unity Theatre Society Rules'
- flyer, Unity Theatre £50,000 purchase and rebuilding appeal'
- flyer, 'A Call to Action': copy/souvenir of the 1926 General Strike
- flyer, 'About Our Lottery'
- booklet, 'Peace Songs' (18pp)

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Memorabilia collected by actor Harry Landis  
regarding the Unity Theatre, [1948-2021)

Includes:

- DVD, 'The Story of the Unity Theatre: the theatre of the Labour and Trade Union Movement' (c.2010)
- flyer for 'a not-so-traditional pantomime' production of 'Cinderella' (1969)
- music and lyrics sheet for 'The Smithfield Market Fire' (by Fred Dallas)
- flyer for an All-Star Charity Show featuring Cleo Laine, Joan Littlewood, Lionel Bart, Dame Sybil Thorndike and others (1974)
- flyer for 'St Joan of the Stockyards' by Bertolt Brecht
- programme for the play 'You Won't Always Be on Top' by Henry Chapman (1960)
- programme for 'The Gorbals Story' by Robert McLeish (1948)
- press cutting, 'Real-life drama' regarding Harry Landis and the Unity Theatre (Islington Tribune, 17 September 2021)

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