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Guide to the David Shepherd Papers 1953-2006



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier	ICU.SPCL.SHEPHERDD
Title	Shepherd, David. Papers
Date	1953-2006
Size	2.75 linear feet (4 boxes)
Repository	Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library 1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract David Shepherd (b. October 10, 1924) founded the Compass Players with Paul Sills in Chicago in 1955. Inspired by Shepherd's goals for a new kind of theatre and Sills' mother Viola Spolin's innovative theatre games, the Compass Players invented a new type of American improvisational theatre that would become an established genre on stage and screen. The collection includes material pertaining to the history of improvisational theatre throughout Shepherd's career, and consists mainly of documents relevant to his professional activities; some correspondence; promotional and artistic materials from professional projects; and personal ephemera, including journals and photographs. Also included are photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings related to the history of the Compass Players and Shepherd's subsequent artistic projects. Materials date between 1953 and 2006, with the bulk of the material dating between 1953 and 1979.

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Restrictions on Use

Series III: Audio-Visual, Subseries 2: Audio-Visual Recordings, does not include an access copy for the video recordings or for one of the audio recordings. Access copies are available for three of the audio-cassettes. Researchers should consult with Special Collections staff before requesting any of these items.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Shepherd, David. Papers, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Biographical Note

David Gwynne Shepherd was born on October 10, 1924 in New York City to a wealthy family. His father, William Edgar Shepherd, was an architect whose mother, Cetty Shepherd, was the sister to Alice Gwynne Vanderbilt, wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt II and notable socialite. Shepherd's mother was hospitalized for schizophrenia after his birth; he was subsequently raised by his father. After attending Phillips Exeter Academy, he enrolled at Harvard University in 1942 and studied English. He served in the army from February 1943 to December 1945. Graduating from Harvard in 1948, he went on to receive an M.A. in the history of theatre at Columbia University in 1951. Shepherd's first marriage was to the actress and director Suzanne (Honey) Stern Shepherd; his second marriage was to the psychologist Constance (Connie) Carr-Shepherd.

Shepherd spent time in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship and taught English literature at the University of Bombay in India before making the decision at the age of twenty-six to move to the Midwest in order to form a political cabaret theatre for the people that dealt with real issues, in the spirit of Bertolt Brecht. After first attempting this project in Cicero, Illinois, where he worked in a steel mill in order to entice his co-workers to be in these performances, he ended up in Chicago, collaborating with University of Chicago students in Hyde Park. The group included Paul Sills, the son of the acting teacher Viola Spolin, whose theatre games served as the basis for the improvisational theatre started by Sills and Shepherd.

Shepherd founded the Playwrights Theatre Club in Chicago in 1953 with Paul Sills and Eugene Troobnick; Troobnick was replaced the following year by another University of Chicago alumnus Bernard (Bernie) Sahlins. Sills and Sahlins would both go on to found Second City in Chicago in 1959. In 1955 Shepherd and Sills put the improvisational model in place with the founding of the Compass Players. Plays and scenarios written by Shepherd were performed in both theatres. The Compass Players was an experimental theatre that thrived in Hyde Park, an eclectic neighborhood fraught with both racial and economic tensions that drew world-class blues and jazz musicians to its clubs while it also drew intellectuals from around the world to the University of Chicago. Many early performers were students at the University, which was still operating on the unique educational model of recent President Robert Maynard Hutchins.

The Compass Players moved to several different Chicago locations as they dealt with financial and artistic disputes, but its improvisational and audience participation elements, along with Shepherd's goal that the theatre should deal with contemporary political and social issues, were quickly recognized as promising innovations. Plans to expand the project outside of Chicago lead to more internal disputes, but in the end, with Shepherd's negotiations, Compass Theatres were opened in Saint Louis, New York, and Hyannisport, Massachusetts. The improvisational comedy launched by the Compass Players would serve as the precursor for a new genre of American theatre, starting with Second City in Chicago. These early projects also launched the careers of a generation of comedic talents, including Alan Alda, Alan Arkin, Ed Asner, Shelley Berman, Barbara Harris, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Jerry Stiller.

Shepherd went on to form the non-profit organization Group Creativity Projects in 1972, which took the improvisation model and attempted to make it accessible to people in a variety of formats, including plays, workshops, radio shows, movies, and novellas. Other non-profits, especially those serving youth, adopted some of his methods. Also in 1972, he co-founded the Improv Olympics, the equivalent of a performance sport that led to competitions in New York and Chicago, and became a fixture in Canadian high schools.

Shepherd moved to Massachusetts and continued to adapt the improvisational theatre model to different genres and to different forms of technology in ways that would allow amateurs as well as professionals to create and perform, culminating in the publication of his book in 2005 *That Movie in Your Head: Guide to Improvising Stories on Video*. He received lifetime achievement awards from Second City, Canadian Improv Games, and Chicago Improv Fest.

Scope Note

The collection is organized into four series:

I. Personal

II. Professional

III. Audio-Visual

IV. Oversize

I. Personal: Contains material on the history of improvisational theatre collected by David Shepherd as well as items related to Shepherd's role in the invention of American improvisational theatre with the founding of the Compass Players in Chicago in 1955. This material includes an article in *Yale/Theatre Magazine* from 1974 in which Shepherd gives an account of the history of the Compass Players and reflects on his improvisational method and its future. Of particular note are David Shepherd's professional journals chronicling the forming of the Compass Players and its artistic management in the 1950s. The correspondence includes a letter from Barbara Harris (1958). Several letters are in reference to the expansion of the Compass Players model from Chicago to Saint Louis, New York, and Hyannisport, Massachusetts. In particular, a letter from Paul Sills discusses the personal and professional relationship of Mike Nichols and Elaine Harris, as well as concerns about copyrighting the Compass Players material from Chicago as intellectual property and the integrity of the original theatre company with David Shepherd's agreement with Ted Flicker to expand the Compass Theatre to New York. Also of note, several letters regarding the expansion of the Compass Theatre in Saint Louis that includes seventeen scenarios used, as it states, for a performance in front of the American Truckers Association. This series is organized topically beginning with collected material on the history of improvisation, then articles, correspondence, and journals. Materials are organized chronologically within each topic.

II. Professional: Contains material from David Shepherd's lifetime of professional projects related to improvisational theatre, beginning with the Playwrights Theatre Club and the Compass Players in Chicago, to the expansion of the Compass Theatre model, the development of audience-performed improv projects in the theatre and on the radio, the founding of the Improvisation Olympics competitions, and the development of improvisational movie-making. This series contains promotional materials, including posters and interviews, as well as transcripts and scenarios of performances. Half of the material is from the Compass Players in the 1950s. It is organized chronologically. For purposes of organization, the term Compass Players is used in the inventory to designate the original theatre group in Chicago in the 1950s. The theatre groups that subsequently developed in the Compass model in Saint Louis, New York, and Hyannisport, Massachusetts are referred to collectively in the inventory with the term Compass Theatre. Improvisation Olympics is used to designate ImprovOlympics and ImprovOlympix.

III. Audio-Visual: Subseries I contains photographs that correspond to the categories in Series II: Professional, covering Shepherd's career, in chronological order. Included in Box 2 is an inventory with descriptions of each photograph by David Shepherd; items in this inventory are numbered and correspond to numbers on the back of each photograph. Of note are photographs from the Compass Players in the 1950s, as well as photographs from the Compass Theatres in Chicago, Saint Louis, New York, and Hyannisport, Massachusetts that include notable personages such as Alan Alda, Alan Arkin, Barbara Harris, Elaine May, Ann Meara, Mike Nichols, and Jerry Stiller.

Subseries II: Audio and Video Recordings consists of six audio-cassettes of performances and five videotapes. A partial inventory of performances on the audio-cassettes can be found in Box 3. Of note are audio recordings of the following performances from the Compass Theatre in 1955-1956: "PTA Meeting," "Mousetrap (Tax Evader)," "Ten Little Indians," and "Fuller Brush Man." Elaine May and Mike Nichols are identified on the label of one cassette, and Shelley Berman and Severn Darden on another. The audiocassettes also include a reunion and retrospective of the Compass Theatre Players in 1976 at Second City. Also of possible note is a VHS Tape of David Shepherd's first improvisational movie from 1977, *Sopha*.

Access copies are available for the three audio cassette tapes related to the Compass Players and the Compass Theatre. No access copy exists for the fourth audio cassette tape or for any of the VHS tapes. Researchers will need to consult with staff before requesting any of these items.

IV. Oversize: Contains three posters from the 1950s, two from the Playwrights Theatre Club and one from the Compass Players.

Related Resources

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html>

University of Chicago. Off-Off Campus. Records

Second City Collection at the Chicago Public Library:

https://www.chipublib.org/archival_post/second-city-collection/

Viola Spolin. Papers at Northwestern University Library: <http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/catalog/inu-ead-spec-archon-624>

Subject Headings

- Alda, Alan, 1936-
- Arkin, Alan
- Asner, Edward
- Berman, Shelley
- Close, Del, 1934-1999
- Darden, Severn, 1929-1995
- Flicker, Theodore J., 1930-2014
- Harris, Barbara, 1935-
- Lampert, Zohra, 1937-
- May, Elaine, 1932-
- Meara, Anne
- Nichols, Mike
- Sahlins, Bernard
- Shepherd, David
- Sills, Paul, 1927-2008
- Spolin, Viola
- Stiller, Jerry
- Troobnick, Eugene, 1926-2003
- Compass Players
- Second City (Theater company)
- University of Chicago. Theatre
- Commedia dell'arte
- Improvisation (Acting)
- Hyde Park (Chicago, Ill.)

INVENTORY

Series I: Personal

Box 1

Folder 1

Collected material on the history of improvisational theatre – Includes personal reflections and interviews, 1957-2005

Box 1

Folder 2

"Creating Myth: A Future Discovery Technique" – by David Shepherd in Futures Conditional, March 1974

Box 1

Folder 3

"A Conversation with David Shepherd" – by Rocco Landesman in Yale/Theatre Magazine, August 1974

Box 1

Folder 4

David Shepherd – Lists of professional projects with later additions, 1978-1979

Box 1

Folder 5

David Shepherd – Self-Evaluations and Project Evaluations, 1974-1979, circa 1970s

Box 1

Folder 6

David Shepherd – Correspondence, 1957-1963, 1991

Box 1

Folder 7

David Shepherd – Correspondence – Chicago Improv Festival Lifetime Achievement Award – Email, 2005

- The email includes a list of the Compass Players from 1955-1959.

Box 1

Folder 8

David Shepherd – Journal – Includes interleaved ephemera, 1953-1954

Box 1

Folder 9

David Shepherd – Journal – Includes interleaved ephemera, 1956-1959

Box 1

Folder 10

David Shepherd – Journal, 1962

Series II: Professional

Box 2

Folder 1

Playwrights Theatre Club – Publicity and fiscal statement, 1953-1954

Box 2

Folder 2

Compass Players – Scenarios – Chicago, 1954-1956, circa 1950s

Box 2

Folder 3

Compass Players – "How to Catch a Tax Evader" – Transcript – Chicago, 1955

Box 2

Folder 4

Compass Players – "The Minister's Daughter" – Transcript – Chicago, 1955

Box 2

Folder 5

Compass Players – Chicago – "PTA Fun Night" – Transcript, circa 1950s

Box 2

Folder 6

Compass Players and Theatre – Promotional photos with captions, photocopy – Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Massachusetts, 1953-1964

Box 2

Folder 7

Compass Players – Publicity – Chicago, 1954-1959, circa 1950s

- Includes an article by David Shepherd, "The Search," Encore Magazine (1959).

Box 2

Folder 8

Compass Theatre – Publicity – St. Louis, New York, Massachusetts, 1961-1966, circa 1960s

Box 2

Folder 9

Compass Theatre – David Shepherd interviews Bill Tomson about the Compass theatre in St. Louis in the 1950s – transcript, 2004

Box 2

Folder 10

Compass Players – Memory of the group by David Shepherd and Leo Stodolsky, 2006

Box 2

Folder 11

Compass Players – "From Past to Present: The COMPASS – A look back upon the first improvisational company that forever changed the face of theatre" – Jacqueline Di Chiara, circa 2000s

Box 2

Folder 12

Second City – Scenario, circa 1970s

Box 2

Folder 13

Response Theatre – Publicity, 1971-1972

Box 2

Folder 14

Responsive Scene – Radio Show – Publicity and Production Notes, 1972-2003, undated

Box 2

Folder 15

Responsive Scene – Audience Scene Suggestion Cards, circa 1973

Box 2

Folder 16

Improvisation Olympics – Publicity, 1973-1987, undated

Box 2

Folder 17

Improvisational Movie-Making for Video Production – Collected Scenarios, 1978-2003

Box 2

Folder 18

Improvisational Movie-Making for Video Production – Publicity, 1974-1977

Box 2

Folder 19

Group Novella – Publicity, 1978

Series III: Audio-Visual

Subseries 1: Photographs

Box 2

Folder 20

of Compass Archive from David Shepherd – Photo inventory with descriptions, circa 2005-2006

Box 2

Folder 21

Ephemera included in the photo inventory by David Shepherd, 1954-1985

- Includes an article about David Shepherd and the Compass Theatre: Peter Bryan, "First Nights in a Barroom," Chicago (January, 1955).

Box 2

Folder 22

Playwrights Theatre Club – Photographs, circa 1950s

Box 2

Folder 23

Compass Players – Chicago – Photographs, circa 1950s

Box 2

Folder 24

Compass Theatre – New York, St. Louis, Hyannisport, MA, and Washington, D.C. – Photographs, circa 1960s

Box 2

Folder 25

Improvisation Olympics – Photographs, circa 1970s

Box 2

Folder 26

Response Theatre – Photographs, 1971

Box 2

Folder 27

Responsive Scene – Photographs, circa 1970s

Box 2

Folder 28

Improvisational Movie-Making for Video Production – Photographs, circa 1970s

Subseries 2: Audio and Video Recordings

Box 3

Folder 1

Audio Cassette Tape and VHS Tape partial inventory from David Shepherd and Ephemera, 2005

- The inventory lists scenes on the audio cassettes that are not listed on the labels.

Box 3

Folder 2

Audio Cassette Tape – Compass Theatre, circa 1950s

- Reformatted digitally as "Shepherd 003"
- Side A labelled: "Games – Mike + Elaine," "A Talk on the Universe – Sev"
- Side B labelled: "Mousetrap (Tax Evader)"

Box 3

Folder 3

Audio Cassette Tape – Compass Theatre, circa 1950s

- Reformatted digitally as "Shepherd 002"
- Side A labelled: "Fuller Brush (orig) – Conclusion," "Duncan Harris – The Gordons..."

Box 3

Folder 4

Audio Cassette Tape – Severn Darden and Shelly Berman

- Reformatted digitally
- Side A labelled: "Severn Darden – The Sound of My Own Voice," undated
- Side B labelled: "Shelley Berman – Great Moments of Comedy – Let Me Tell You a Funny Story," undated

Box 3

Folder 5

Audio Cassette Tape – Responsive Scene, 1972

- Side A labelled: "The Responsive Scene – WRVR 1972"
- Side B labelled: "The Responsive Scene"

Box 3

Folder 6

Audio Cassette Tape – Compass "C" Workshop – New York, 1979

- Reformatted digitally as "Shepherd 001"
- Side A labelled: "Compass 'C' 8/31/79 – 6 week workshop @ South St. Seaport"

Box 3

Folder 7

CD-R – "The Compass 50th Anniversary, July 5, 2005" – Images, 2005

- Three items labelled: "The Compass 50th Anniversary July 5, 2005, black and white images, copyright Cynthia Pettersen & Chicago Improv Festival;" "The Compass 50th Anniversary July 5, 2005, color images, copyright Cynthia Pettersen & Chicago Improv Festival;" and "The Compass 50th Anniversary July 5, 2005, copyright Jerry Schulman & Chicago Improv Festival"
- Item: VHS Tape – "Compass '54-'94"
- Labelled: "Lee Davis interview of Shepherd; Expert Game; Story by Elisa Seohs; Genetics Interview LTV; Channel 501; OJ Simpson; Halloween & Gothic Chick"
- Item: VHS Tape – "Sopha," 1977, 50 minutes
- Labelled: "Sopha with David Shepherd, copyright 1977 Group Creativity"
- Item: VHS Tape – "David Shepherd Lifetime Award," 2005

- Labelled: "Siska edit of improv movie made in one day at WEEDS (Chicago), Tragedy of Deceit; David Shepherd Lifetime Achievement Award, Chicago Improv Festival; Interview in Loft with David Shepherd"
- Item: VHS Tape – Documentary by Michael di Paolo, June 4, 2004
- Labelled: "Shepherd: Improv's Forgotten Prophet, copyright 2004 M. di Paolo"
- Enclosed ephemera included in Box 3, Folder 1
- Item: VHS Tape – "Songs of Freedom," Interview of David Shepherd by Joel Landy on Manhattan Cable, 1998

Series IV: Oversize

Box 4

Folder 1

Playwrights Theatre Club – Posters, circa 1950s

Box 4

Folder 2

Compass Players – Poster, circa 1950s