

Finding Aid for the

Robert Bromley Collection, circa 1907-1980

Los Angeles Public Library, Photo Collection



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Descriptive Summary

Title

Robert Bromley Collection, circa 1907-1980

Collection Number

GPC_b189-b192

Extent

4 boxes in collection (2 linear ft.)

Repository

The Los Angeles Public Library. Photo Collection.
Los Angeles, California 90071

Abstract

Robert Bromley (1907-1981) was a world-renowned puppeteer who popularized the “visible puppeteer” style of puppetry. Bromley used his marionettes to satirize personality archetypes. His marionettes danced, sang, played piano, flew from a trapeze, and one even did a strip tease. Over the course of his career Bromley performed all over the United States and in over twenty countries on five continents in the most famous nightclubs and cabarets of the time, and in his later years, school assemblies throughout the United States. Bromley performed for notables ranging from royalty to Hollywood celebrities. Bromley was the first puppeteer to appear on British television (BBC) and was a guest twice on the Ed Sullivan show. Bromley documented his extensive career in a series of scrapbooks. The bulk of the collection documents his career from the late 1920s to the late 1970s. Contents include photographs, programs, ephemera, personal and business correspondence, and newspaper clippings.

Physical Location

Boxes housed in the “Cold Room” at Central Library on Lower Level 4.

Administrative Information

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Restrictions on Access

This collection is stored on-site at the Central Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. It is open for research by appointment only.

Provenance/Source of Acquisition

Gift of Charles Taylor, October, 2021

Preferred Citation

[Item], Robert Bromley Collection/ Los Angeles Public Library

Biography/History

Robert Bromley (1907-1981) was a world-renowned puppeteer who popularized the "visible puppeteer" style of puppetry. Bromley used his marionettes to satirize personality archetypes. His marionettes danced, sang, played piano, flew from a trapeze, and one even did a strip tease. Over the course of his career Bromley performed all over the United States and in over twenty countries on five continents in the most famous nightclubs and cabarets of the time, including the Lido Cabaret on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, Moulin Rouge, Folies Bergère, the Palladium in London, and La Scala in Berlin. Bromley performed for such notables as the King and Queen of England and for Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly. Bromley was the first puppeteer to appear on British television (BBC) and was a guest twice on the Ed Sullivan show. Bromley performed and produced shows far and wide, from Los Angeles to North Africa to Australia, and many places in between.

Bromley, whose given name was Robert Cressy, was born Minnesota in 1907. He began his puppetry career in the late 1920s while studying to be a theatrical producer at Yale University. He applied for a position with the famous Yale Puppeteers and was hired by Harry Burnett, one of the founding members. The surname Bromley was adopted at the request of the Yale Puppeteers (Harry Burnett, Forman Brown, and Richard "Roddy" Brandon) for alliterative purposes. While in college, Bromley spent his summer vacations traveling the Northeast performing with the Yale Puppeteers, who also invited him to perform at their Teatro Torito on Olvera Street in Los Angeles in the early 1930s.

After graduating, Bromley did a brief stint as director of a Beverly Hills theater before going on to work in the miniatures department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in the early 1930s. Bromley built models for crashes and disasters, as well as stand-ins for celebrities for scenes too dangerous to film. As was true throughout his career, Bromley hand-carved and painted his marionettes, with only a few exceptions. He entertained MGM celebrities with their life-like puppet counterparts. Marie Dressler was especially impressed with Bromley's puppetry talent and encouraged

him to start his own puppet theater. After leaving MGM, Bromley took Dressler's advice and opened his own theater on Olvera Street. Like his Yale Puppeteer colleagues, Bromley attracted many celebrities to his shows, including Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin. During the mid 1930s, Bromley was appointed director of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Los Angeles puppet theater, Theatre of the Magic Strings, where he produced and directed many shows, including "Captain Kidd."

In 1936, Bromley began touring the United States, performing at famous venues like the Savoy Hotel in Chicago and the renowned Rainbow Room in New York City. In 1939, Bromley accepted an offer to perform in "High Time," a variety show at the Palladium in London. This one-year engagement began a four decades-long career of traversing the globe performing in cabarets, nightclubs, casinos, and theaters. He also performed for thousands of children throughout his career, especially in his later years, while touring the country performing at school assemblies. He also performed at children's hospitals and shelters for abused children wherever he traveled in the world. Throughout his career and extensive travels, Bromley photographed the people and places he encountered, including rare glimpses into the daily lives of indigenous peoples in North Africa and South America. Bromley not only documented his storied career through photography and scrapbooks, but also documented life around the globe throughout the 20th century. In addition to this very personal collection of scrapbooks, Bromley also has collections at the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress (WPA Federal Theater Project), and the Puppeteers of America.

Scope and Content

The Robert Bromley collection is composed of personal scrapbooks documenting the life and career of world-renowned puppeteer, Bob Bromley (1907-1981), who compiled the scrapbooks himself. The scrapbooks are roughly in chronological order, but the timeline sometimes varies within volumes. The scrapbooks begin circa 1907 when Bromley was an infant and end in 1980, a year before his death. Over the course of his career Bromley performed all over the United States and in over twenty countries on five continents in the most famous nightclubs and cabarets of the time, including the Lido Cabaret on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, Moulin Rouge, Folies Bergère, the Palladium in London, and La Scala in Berlin. Bromley performed for such notables as the King and Queen of England and for Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly. Bromley was the first puppeteer to appear on British television (BBC) and was a guest twice on the Ed Sullivan show. Bromley performed and produced shows far and wide, from Los Angeles to North Africa to Australia, and many places in between. The bulk of the collection documents his career from the late 1920s to the late 1970s. Contents include photographs (personal travel photos with friends, co-stars, and citizens of the countries he visited; famous landmarks in foreign countries; autographed photographs of celebrities; publicity photos of Bromley and his marionettes); programs; ephemera (ticket stubs; foreign currency; travel documents); personal and business correspondence on original stationery (telegrams, invitations to perform; congratulations and thank you letters; fan letters); and newspaper clippings (reviews, advertisements for shows; and articles detailing Bromley's career).

Organization and Arrangement

The collection was originally housed in two red scrapbooks measuring 9 x 11 inches, eight three-ring binders labeled volumes one through eight, and two spiral-bound notebooks with pockets. The collection is roughly in chronological order, but the timeline occasionally varies within volumes. A typed inventory for volumes one through seven was provided with the collection. The collection has been rehoused following Bromley's original arrangement according to chronology and volume order. The binders covered Bromley's infancy through the last few years of his life, with the exception of the years 1946 and 1947, which were housed in two red scrapbooks. These have been left intact and rehoused in a box. The contents of the binders were glued to three-hole-punched cardstock pages. These pages have been rehoused into individual sleeves with each volume in its own folder. The contents of the two spiral-bound notebooks were consolidated into one folder. The collection is housed in four boxes (2 linear ft.). GPC_b189 contains the two scrapbooks left intact. GPC_b190 contains binder volumes 1-3 (Folder 1, Folder 2, and Folder 3). GPC_b191 contains binder volumes 4-6 (Folder 4, Folder 5, and Folder 6). GPC_b192 contains binder volumes 7 and 8 (Folder 7 and Folder 8) and the contents of the two spiral notebooks (Folder 9).

Related Materials

See also: Yale Puppeteers/Turnabout Theatre Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

Container List

GPC_b189: Two red scrapbooks measuring 9 x 11 inches covering the period February 1946 to October 1947.

- **Red Scrapbook #1** – Covers the period from February 1946 - February 1947 with two photos from 1939. The first half of the label on the front cover is missing. The later half reads, "...to Europe." Scrapbook covers Bromley's one year engagement performing in "High Time " at the Palladium in London and his travels in England and Paris, including photographs from the transatlantic flight from the United States to England. Contents include photographs (personal travel photos with friends and co-stars; famous landmarks in England and Paris; autographed photographs of English actors; publicity photos of Bromley and his marionettes); programs (from Bromley's shows and others he attended around London); ephemera (ticket stubs; foreign currency; travel documents); personal and business correspondence on original stationery (telegrams, invitations to perform; congratulations and thank you letters; fan letters); and newspaper clippings (reviews, advertisements for show; and two articles detailing Bromley's early career). Items of note:
 - A copy of the schedule of acts for the "Command Performance," a benefit fundraiser hosted by the King and Queen of England and their daughters, princesses Margaret and Elizabeth. There is more documentation of Bromley's participation in this event in Box 2, Envelope 3.

- A 1946 article with photographs from Leader Magazine detailing the making of Bromley's film version of Cinderella in Technicolor, which utilized over 175 figures in the ballroom scene alone.
- 1946 letter from the BBC inviting Bromley to appear on television.
- **Red Scrapbook #2** – Covers the period from March 1947 - October 1947. Label on the front cover is missing, but the first page notes, "March 8, 1947 - we leave London after one year in England." Scrapbook covers Bromley's performances and travels throughout Europe (Paris – Lido Cabaret on Champs-Elysees; Stockholm; Copenhagen; Brussels; Lisbon; Barcelona). Contents include photographs (personal travel photos with friends and co-stars; famous landmarks in Europe; autographed photographs of foreign actors; publicity photos of Bromley and his marionettes; nude photos of cabaret performers); programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended); ephemera (ticket stubs; foreign currency; travel documents); personal and business correspondence on original stationery (telegrams, invitations to perform; congratulations and thank you letters; fan letters); and newspaper clippings (reviews; advertisements for show). Item of note:
 - A pen drawing of a bull and clown matador signed by "Dominguez 1947." This may be the work of early 20th century Spanish Surrealist, Óscar Domínguez (1906-1957), who committed suicide at 51 in Paris, France. Dominguez was known to frequent Paris cabarets and may have met Bromley at the Lido Cabaret.

GPC_b190: Folders 1, 2, and 3 which cover the years circa 1907 - 1954. The years 1946-1947 are primarily covered in GPC_b189.

- **GPC_b190_f01** Originally labeled, "Volume 1." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Includes Bromley's typewritten inventory of volumes 1-7. Covers the period circa 1907 – 1938 with one photograph from 1942 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: early relatives; Yale University; Yale Puppeteers; to Hollywood and M.G.M. studios; my family comes West; directing Little Theatre in Calif.; Yale Puppeteers want me back to Olvera St.; opening my own theatre on Olvera St.; my puppet theater tour; my first trip to Honolulu; W.P.A. director; Snow White and Seven Dwarfs at Robinsons; my operalogues; Burr T. and finger puppet [referring to Burr Tillstrom, puppeteer who created Kukla, Fran and Ollie]; first professional photo; beginning on my own in show biz; my first opera singer, tap dancer, pianist, trapeze [referring to marionettes]; my production Snow White in Chicago; another early pic of Burr T.; Carl Marx, clown [marionette]; beginnings in theatres; finally, the Rainbow Room in N.Y. Item of note:
 - Photographs of Yale puppeteers on the road in the late 1920s.

- An original program from Bromley's first show at the Olvera Street puppet theater.
 - Bromley written a note about Walt Disney not forgiving him for "stealing" Snow White and that as a result, Disney changed contracts to protect his "stars" and "hired many puppeteers but not me!"

- **GPC_b190_f02** Originally labeled, "Volume 2." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the period 1938-1944 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: the Normandie to Europe; opening Trocadero; British T.V.; Holburn Empire; London Coliseum; 1939, to Berlin, the Scala Theatre; return to Trocadero; opening my first musical, Black and Blue; success; Royal Albert Hall; early opera singer; air raids on London; return trip home on freighter; torpedoing; back home safe and working the Rice Hotel, Houston; Peck Kelley; color pix Opera and Piano [referring to marionettes]; Blue Room N. O. [New Orleans] with Marx Bros.; to El Patio in Mexico; Guy; to Rio de Janeiro; tap gets bew [sic] costume; Quitendenhia; other casinos; touring toward home; Bahia; Amazon river. Items of note:
 - While performing in Berlin in January 1939, Bromley wrote that he turned down an invitation from Adolf Hitler to appear in the cabaret scene of The Merry Widow in Hamburg. He also noted deteriorating conditions in Berlin and that Jews were being prosecuted. He returned to London before war broke out between Germany and England.
 - Photographs of London in 1939 as the city prepared for war (air raid signs, sandbags in front of storefronts, "balloons" attached to cables to prevent German planes flying over).
 - Bromley was on a freighter back to the United States that rescued sailors from the British aircraft carrier, Courageous, that was torpedoed by the Germans. In GPC_b192_f08, there are photos of the recovery of a body and a burial at sea.
 - Bromley took many photographs throughout Central and South America of indigenous peoples going about their lives.

- **GPC_b190_f03** Originally labeled, "Volume 3." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the period 1943; 1944; January-March, November 1946; 1948; 1949; 1950-1951; 1954 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Most of 1946 and 1947 are covered in GPC_b189 (red scrapbooks). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both Bromley's

shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: Headin' home from Rio; Panama Canal; pix of Central American ports; wires from Schuberts; back to London, the Palladium; the Command Performance; to Paris and Lido Cabaret; first time; back to Hollywood; to Washington D.C. – letter from attorney Nuremberg trials; N.O. Blue Room again; me, Alex, swamps; Burr T. again walking tracks [referring to Burr Tillstrom, puppeteer who created Kukla, Fran and Ollie]; to Paris again, 1949; me as a gangster in movie, London; Valerie Hobson; friends in London; home gain; buying a trailer; early angels car; to Chicago; ice skating show at Hilton. Items of note:

- Bromley's invitation to participate in the King and Queen's "Command Performance," a fundraiser for Variety Artistes Benevolent Fund and Institution for Indigent Variety and Circus Artistes. Includes a letter confirming the King and Queen's approval for Bromley to participate, the original program for the evening, and a congratulations from the King and Queen to Bromley for being chosen to perform. Bromley also included newspaper clippings about the event, which the King and Queen and princesses, Margaret and Elizabeth, attended to great fanfare.
- Thank you letter dated November 26, 1948, from attorney Grace Kanode Llewellyn thanking Bromley for his participation in a children's hospital benefit. Bromley noted that Llewellyn was "the only woman lawyer and judge at Nuremberg trials."

GPC_b191: Folders 4, 5, and 6 which cover the years 1952 - 1960.

- **GPC_b191_f01** Originally labeled, "Volume 4." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers parts of the years 1955 and 1957 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: back to N. O. [New Orleans] again; to Mexico again with trailer; filming a T.V. commercial; to Buenos Aires; NELY, etc.; to Chile; pix of Clarite, Guy, me; to Belgium; pix of stripper [referring to strip-tease marionette]; to Germany; Pete [clown marionette] and me; to Stockholm and China theatre; pix stripper [marionette]; Sweden; Copenhagen; pix mermaid and Pete [clown marionette]; Pete [clown marionette] at zoo.
- **GPC_b191_f02** Originally labeled, "Volume 5." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the years 1955-1958 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both

Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: to Paris, Moulin Rouge program; pix magic number; Guerin's estate; pix Lido show; Danny Kaye; Monte Carlo program; Medrano program; Program Prince Rainier, Grace Kelly wedding; back to Stockholm, Lena Horne; Spain; Rex program; we fly to Marrekech; to Australia; equator certificate; Honolulu enroute Melbourne, Olympic follies; Melbourne Lord Mayor's Command Performance; to Adelaide, my house; reopening Melbourne in Panton; pix from same. Items of note:

- Autographs to Bromley from Danny Kaye (performing as Toulouse-Lautrec at the Moulin Rouge in Paris in October 1955) and Lena Horne, who was also performing at the China Theatre in Stockholm (June 1956).
 - January 22, 1956 program for the pre-wedding gala celebration for Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly where Bob Bromley was one of the performers among various acts and dance troupes.
 - Photographs of the interior of the famous Lido Cabaret on the Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1955-1956.
 - Hand-drawn caricature of Bromley with his strip-tease marionette. The artist's signature is undecipherable and it is not dated.
 - Certificate with interesting graphics from Pan American World Airways to Bromley for crossing the equator on May 20, 1957.
- **GPC_b191_f03** Originally labeled, "Volume 6." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the years 1952, 1956-1959, 1960 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, publicity, and nude photos of cabaret performers), programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Many pages have water damage in the bottom right-hand corner. Original inventory describes contents as: Lido program, 1956, pix from Paris; Joy, Boyd, color strip, Eddy, Frank L.; café near Cannes; leaning tower of Pisa; my Porsche; flying to South Africa from London; Stan Holloway; African native village; letter, balloon from child; Skelton and natives pix; pix Bulawayo; Port Eliz; Durban; weekend with Cyril; Kruger; Victoria Falls; the Comet; Santiago, Chile; my production at Nacional of my show, many stills and publicity. Items of note:
 - Bromley took many photographs of indigenous peoples in Africa. There is also a photograph of him performing in front of a large crowd of what he terms, "natives," in traditional dress. The village is in Namibia and is called Namib's Valley of a Thousand Hills.
 - Bromley wrote and produced a large stage production for children entitled, "El Mundo Maravilloso de Bob Bromley." He also wrote and

composed the music for a 25-piece orchestra. The play was performed during matinees at the Teatro El Nacional theater in Buenos Aires in the fall of 1959. There are numerous stills and publicity photos, as well as publicity from local newspapers.

- Bromley received a certificate for being on the first commercial flight from Livingstone, South Africa to London by the new Comet Jetliner on May 6, 1952. The certificate also notes the duration of the flight: 20 hours, 48 minutes.

GPC_b192 Folders 7, 8, and 9 which cover the years 1957 - 1980.

- **GPC_b192_f01** Originally labeled, "Volume 7." Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the years 1957, 1958, 1960-1965, 1971, 1972, 1977 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, and publicity), programs (both Bromley's shows and other shows he attended), ephemera (ticket stubs, travel documents), personal and business correspondence on original stationery, and newspaper clippings. Original inventory describes contents as: publicity, N.O., Dallas, Houston; 2 pix of trapeze performer [marionette]; Avril, Henry and Boyd; pix Selam House; my Ford; Max Reddy and wife, Bill, Phyllis; Can-Can [marionettes]; Nellie and pool; Bill K. Magic Mountain; Dave's wedding; Bill K; Juanito [marionette]; Archie; Bill Stevens; Buster and Robert; my house and pool; my award; music; Pete [marionette]; still of conductor of Cinderella; on stage at Brownsville; my T.V. program; Barlow's Punch and Judy; sketch and pix ballet dancer; I begin tour for national schools; trip to wine country; arts, Otto, Jim, Bill S.; I open at Magic Mountain; program, teaching at Cal State Univ. [Long Beach]. Items of note:

- Bromley received a professional award in November 1965 from the Los Angeles Guild of Puppetry.
- Photographs from Bromley's television show featuring his marionette, "Pete the Clown."
- Photographs from Bromley's puppet theater at the new amusement park, Magic Mountain, in Valencia, CA between 1971 and 1974?
- A program from California State University Long Beach's October 1956 production of "Threepenny Opera" lists Bromley as a faculty member. Bromley also notes that he was teaching at the university in 1977.

- **GPC_b192_f02** Originally labeled, "Volume 8." This volume was not included in the original inventory. Contents originally contained in a blue, 3-ring binder. Covers the years 1954, 1960, 1970, 1972-1974, 1977-1979, 1980 (volumes are roughly in chronological order, but there are a few exceptions). Contents include photographs (travel, family, friends, publicity, and recovery of bodies/burial at sea from the 1939 torpedoing of a British aircraft carrier –

news clipping in GPC_b190_f02), programs, ephemera, personal and business correspondence on original stationery (including thank-you letters from various schools for his performances at school assemblies), and newspaper clippings. Items of note:

- National School Assemblies letter noting Bromley was on the Ed Sullivan show twice. Both times he flew to New York from an engagement in Stockholm and flew back the next day.
 - In August 1979, Bromley donated photographs and a script for Captain Kidd and numerous clippings and programs of marionette productions to the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project of George Mason University in Virginia. This collection was on loan from the Library of Congress from 1974-1994.
 - New York Public Library letter dated April 30, 1979 informing Bromley they could not return photographs from his collection, but could provide copies.
 - Renaissance Award from The Puppeteers of America in 1979.
 - Letter from The Puppeteers of America Audio-Visual library thanking Bromley for editing his 16mm film, "Bob Bromley in Person" featuring "your exciting days as a professional puppeteer." (Color, 10 minutes).
 - Photograph of Bromley's clown and pianist marionettes in an exhibit at the 13th annual UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionette) congress and Puppetry Festival of the Puppeteers of America in June 1980, which took place at Georgetown University in Washington DC.
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- **GPC_b192_f03** Miscellaneous contents originally housed in two spiral-bound notebooks with pockets. Covers the early 1970s through 1980. Contents include 8 x 10 photographs (including two negatives) of Bromley, his puppets, and Bromley performing at school assemblies; flyers advertising his puppet show for schools; business correspondence; and a newsletter for the city of Valencia, CA announcing the opening of "The Tower" at Magic Mountain.