

Terrence McNally Display
Stories to Tell, Fall 2018
Harry Ransom Center

Terrence McNally at 80

This autumn, the Harry Ransom Center celebrates the 80th birthday of award-winning playwright Terrence McNally. McNally is one the most enduring and respected American playwrights, responsible for over 80 plays, musicals, and opera librettos over the past 50 years. His contributions to the theatre extend to his advocacy for playwriting as a profession and the mentorship of emerging artists. His works have helped launch the careers of some of America's great actors, including F Murray Abraham, Nathan Lane, Audra McDonald, and Doris Roberts.

McNally's writing was ahead of its time. When other writers might have given up in the face of early-career criticism, McNally not only persisted, but his style ultimately shaped American drama through works like *Master Class*, *The Lisbon Traviata*, and *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*. His *Andre's Mother* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* humanized the AIDS crisis for audiences struggling to cope with the plague, and his *Corpus Christi* grappled with contemporary homophobia and hate crimes. Musicals like *Ragtime* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* expanded the possibilities of the form, and his opera *Dead Man Walking* is one of the most frequently produced contemporary American operas around the world. The hallmarks of McNally's writing are his sharp wit, his complex characters, and stories that touch the core of the human experience. This year, McNally was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The honor of election is considered the highest form of recognition of artistic merit in the United States.

In 1999, McNally gifted his archive to the Ransom Center. Over the years, he has generously added to the papers, and the most recent addition includes manuscripts for his latest play, *Fire and Air*, which premiered in 2018 and will be performed at Austin's ZACH Theatre in the spring of 2019. With an emphasis on his entire career and process, this display shares only a small fraction of the rich material his archive holds.

Dr. Eric Colleary
Cline Curator of
Theatre and Performing Arts

Unidentified Photographer
[Terrence McNally], ca. 2016
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

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Unidentified Photographer
Terrence McNally as a child, ca. 1939
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

Unidentified Photographer
Terrence McNally with his mother Dorothy, ca. 1939
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

Terrence McNally was born on November 3, 1938 in St. Petersburg, Florida to Hubert and Dorothy McNally. They soon moved to Corpus Christi, Texas where Terrence grew up and went to school. As a child, McNally recalls listening to radio programs like *The Green Hornet* and *The Lone Ranger*, as well as the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, which inspired an interest in art and storytelling.

39, 40

Unidentified Photographer
Yearbook photograph of Terrence McNally, ca. 1955
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

Unidentified Photographer
Maurine McElroy, 2002
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's high school English teacher Maurine McElroy invited McNally and a group of other interested students to receive extra tutoring on the works of Shakespeare. McElroy encouraged McNally as a writer, and the two remained in touch for the rest of her life. She was his guest at the premiere of the Broadway revival of *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* in 2002.

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Postcards and letters from Terrence McNally to Maurine McElroy, 1959–1998

Terrence McNally Collection

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Feedback from Maurine McElroy to Terrence McNally on a high school assignment, ca. 1955

Terrence McNally Papers

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Article "Terrence McNally Letters: Ethel Merman Come Home!" from the *New York Guide*, 1979

Terrence McNally Papers

Letter from Ethel Merman to Terrence McNally, 1979

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's parents were both native New Yorkers who encouraged his interests in music and theatre. On May 16, 1946, McNally was taken to the Broadway production of *Annie Get Your Gun* starring the legendary Ethel Merman. It was a formative experience for McNally, and when Merman would eventually retire from the stage, he argued publicly that America still needed her.

49.5

***The Roller Coaster* published in the *Columbia Review*, 1960**

Terrence McNally Papers

In 1956, McNally entered Columbia College in New York as a liberal arts major. While at school, he worked summers as a reporter for a Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*, for which he interviewed then-senator Lyndon Johnson. His first play, *The Roller Coaster*, was published in the *Columbia Review* in 1960, the same year he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a Bachelor of Arts degree. It was at this time McNally met Edward Albee, then at the beginning of his career. They began a serious relationship which continued until the premiere of Albee's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in 1963.

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Richard Avedon (American, 1923–2004)
Terrence McNally, playwright, New York, 1965
Gelatin silver print
Terrence McNally Papers

In 1961, Terrence McNally sent samples of his writing to Molly Kazan, head of the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio in New York. Alongside her husband, director Elia Kazan, Mrs. Kazan recognized that McNally was a strong writer but had little background in theatre. She offered him a one-year stage management position at the Actors Studio, so he could learn the business. There, he met playwrights like Arthur Kopit, Adrienne Kennedy, William Inge, and Tennessee Williams.

50, 51

Typescript draft of *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* with revisions, ca. 1964
Terrence McNally Papers

Letter from John Steinbeck to Terrence McNally about *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, 1965
Terrence McNally Papers

From 1961 to 1962, McNally worked as a tutor for the two children of Nobel Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck. Steinbeck would remain a friend and mentor till his death in 1968. McNally's first full-length Broadway play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* opened in April 1965

after a brief workshop at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Starring veteran stage actress Eileen Heckart as the mother of a gay son, the play shocked audiences, and critics tore it to pieces. John Simon called the play “the prize horror of the season” in *New York Magazine*.

Steinbeck’s letter to McNally after the opening night of *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* shows a mentor comforting a respected protégé. Encouraging McNally not to give up writing, he reminds him of “the old Texas saying—‘Who ain’t been thro’ed, ain’t rode.’” The play closed after a two-week run.

52, 53, 54

Manuscript page for *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, 1951

John Steinbeck Collection

Typescript draft of *Here’s Where I Belong* by Terrence McNally with revisions by John Steinbeck, ca. 1968

Terrence McNally Papers

Letter from John Steinbeck to Terrence McNally regarding *Here’s Where I Belong*, ca. 1968

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally was devastated by the failure of the play, and returned to journalism. After some encouragement by friends and the novelist Norman Mailer, he successfully applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1966. The grant gave him the space to write a series of successful one-act plays that were produced across the country.

In 1968, Steinbeck encouraged McNally to write the book for a musical version of his award-winning 1952 novel *East of Eden*. The musical, titled *Here’s Where I Belong*, featured lyrics by Alfred Uhry and music by Robert Waldman. In this notated script and accompanying letter, Steinbeck offers McNally feedback on a draft of the script’s final scene.

The collaborative process of writing a musical required McNally to confront demands for script revisions he did not agree with. In Philadelphia, he asked for his name be removed from the project. The musical opened on Broadway on February 20, 1968. Writing for *The New York Times*, Clive Barnes remarked that “the most distinguishing aspect of

Here's Where I Belong... is the scenery by Ming Cho Lee. But no one ever walked out of a theater humming the scenery." The play ran for 20 previews and closed immediately after opening night.

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Wagner International Photos (American, active 1950s–2000)

[Scene from *Next*], 1968

Gelatin silver print

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally found critical success in his early years through his one-act plays. *Next*, which opened off-Broadway in 1969 and ran for four years, focuses on an overweight, middle-aged man who is mistakenly drafted into the army. *The New York Times* described *Next* as "extraordinarily funny, but it is also very touching." In this period, McNally's plays *Sweet Eros*, *Witness*, *¡Cuba Si!*, and *Noon* proved to critics that he had mastered the one-act form. Two of his one-acts, paired under the title *Bad Habits*, moved from off-off-Broadway to off-Broadway to Broadway for a successful run at the Booth Theatre. In 1969, he received his second Guggenheim Fellowship and was a runner-up for the Drama Desk Award for most promising playwright.

56, 57

William Baker (American, 1943–)

[Stephanie Cotsirilos and Michael Vale in *The Tubs*], 1974

Gelatin silver print

Terrence McNally Papers

William Baker (American, 1943–)

[Scene from *The Tubs*], 1974

Gelatin silver print

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's first major breakthrough for a full-length play was *The Ritz*, which was first produced at Yale University in 1974 under the title *The Tubs*. It is farce about a straight man with a mafia hit out on him who unwittingly takes refuge in a gay bathhouse known as the Ritz. It opened on Broadway in 1975 with F. Murray Abraham and Rita Moreno, the first play on Broadway written with almost exclusively gay characters. Moreno

won a Best Supporting Actress Tony Award for her performance, and McNally won awards from the *Village Voice*, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It ran for 400 performances and was adapted into a film directed by Richard Lester with a screenplay by McNally.

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Dramatists Guild Newsletter, 1985

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally served as vice president of the Dramatists Guild of America from 1981 to 1999. The Dramatists Guild is the national professional organization of writers for the theatre, providing guidance, advocacy, and mentorship opportunities. During his long tenure, McNally sought ways to support emerging playwrights and fought to protect their rights, as demonstrated in this open letter to the Guild membership regarding production contracts.

59, 60

Television treatment for “Frankie and Johnny,” ca. 1985

Terrence McNally Papers

Opening night playbill for *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune* featuring Edie Falco and Stanley Tucci, 2002

New York City Playbills Collection

In the 1980s, McNally considered a shift to television and film. The treatment shown here was for a television show called “Frankie and Johnny” about a couple who are perfectly average besides being gay. When it didn’t get developed, McNally (knowing a good title when he found one) was inspired to write a play with the same title for the young actress Kathy Bates and his by then good friend and collaborator F Murray Abraham. Frankie is a sarcastic waitress who has a quick sexual encounter with Johnny, a short-order cook. Johnny wants more from Frankie than she is able to offer, and the play explores the challenges of negotiating a more intimate connection. The play premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1987, with Kenneth Welsh replacing Abraham early in the run. Edith Oliver in the *New Yorker* wrote that it was “among the best plays [McNally]

has written,” and Frank Rich in *The New York Times* noted that McNally “examines his characters’ connections with a new forthrightness and maturity, and it’s just possible that, in the process, he’s written the most serious play yet about intimacy in the age of AIDS.” *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune* was revived for Broadway in 2002 starring Edie Falco and Stanley Tucci.

61, 62

Article about *The Lisbon Traviata* from *New York Magazine*, 1989
Terrence McNally Papers

Card from actor Anthony Heald to Terrence McNally, 1989
Terrence McNally Papers

McNally turned to his love for opera in *The Lisbon Traviata*. The play focuses on Mendy, a passionate opera fan who begs his friend Stephen to give him a pirated recording of Maria Callas performing *La Traviata* in Lisbon. In discussing the opera, the two men find parallels to their own lives in a way that is both comic and tragic. The play premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1989 with a cast that included Nathan Lane and Anthony Heald, both of whom would become regular performers in McNally’s plays. The play is now considered a major turning point in American theatre—the characters of the play are all gay, but the play isn’t about their being gay. As McNally told *The New York Times*, *The Lisbon Traviata* is “not a statement about gays or gay culture. It could be about four heterosexuals obsessed with baseball statistics.... It’s about romance and dissolution and abandonment.”

63, 64

Page from the first draft of *Andre’s Mother*, 1989
Terrence McNally Papers

Letter from Mark Koenig to Terrence McNally about *Andre’s Mother*, 1990
Terrence McNally Papers

At the height of the AIDS crisis, McNally wrote a television drama for PBS’s *American Playhouse* series about the relationship between a mother

and the male lover of her deceased son Andre, who died from complications relating to AIDS. The moving story was well-received by critics and audiences alike, with *The New York Times* applauding McNally for dealing with “a subject on which prime-time commercial television... has been virtually, and shamefully, silent.” It was awarded the 1990 Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries, Movie, or Dramatic Special.

65, 66, 67

“Hearing Voices is the Good Part in Writing a Play” from *The New York Times*, 1991

Terrence McNally Papers

Card from actor Christine Baranski to Terrence McNally, 1991

Terrence McNally Papers

Card from actor Nathan Lane to Terrence McNally, 1991

Terrence McNally Papers

The Manhattan Theatre Club’s 1991 production of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* brought together the talents of Christine Baranski, Nathan Lane, Anthony Heald, and Swoosie Kurtz. The play focuses on Sally, whose brother recently died from complications relating to AIDS and left her his beach house in the gay resort community of the Pines on Fire Island. Sally and her husband spend the Fourth of July weekend at the house with another married couple. The play explores what happens when these straight characters suddenly find themselves in an entirely gay context, while also revealing the previously unknown depths of their own homophobia.

In an interview, McNally once remarked that he could be “braver as a writer knowing that I have [actors] Nathan [Lane], Christine [Baranski], or Tony [Heald] delivering my lines. It’s the old question, what comes first... the good play or the performance that makes the play work. I never thought I wrote literature. I wrote plays for actors and I need actors I trust.”

68, 69

Signed poster for the original Broadway production of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 1992

Terrence McNally Papers

Film clip of the performance of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* at the Tony Awards, 1993

In 1990, famed composer-lyricist duo John Kander and Fred Ebb invited McNally to write the book of a new musical based on Manuel Puig's novel *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*. The three had collaborated previously on *The Rink*, an original musical, in 1984, but the Chita Rivera/Liza Minnelli musical was met with a mixed critical response. This time, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* would make McNally a recognized musical book writer. Puig's story focuses on Molina, a prisoner in Argentina who copes by fantasizing about his favorite musical movie star, Aurora. The production opened in London in 1992 under the direction of Hal Prince and starring Chita Rivera, Brent Carver, and Anthony Crivello. The Broadway transfer in 1993 with the same cast won the Tony Award for Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical, among many others, and ran for over 900 performances.

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Review of *A Perfect Ganesh* from *The New York Times*, 1993

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's 1993 play *A Perfect Ganesh* tells the story of two women who travel to India, leaving their stay-at-home husbands behind, in search of adventure and perhaps even a spiritual healing of the sadness in their own lives. *The Times* of London wrote that the play is "as close to perfect as McNally has come in his distinguished body of work." The play was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

71, 72, 73, 74

Film clips of the original stage production of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, 1995

Unidentified Photographers

Photographs from the film set of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, 1996

Gelatin silver prints

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's next play, *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, is about eight gay New Yorkers who spend three holiday weekends at an upstate vacation home. Over the course of these weekends, the friends grapple with a broad range of issues including AIDS, commitment in relationships, and loneliness. Focusing primarily on the characters and dialogue over any particular plot, the play received rave reviews from critics who compared the work with Chekhov's exploration of loss and the passage of time. Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* noted that the play "depends as much on the accumulation of mundane details as on its larger statements about the inequities and horrors that are taken for granted in this world." It won the Tony Award for Best Play. The following year, McNally adapted the play for film, starring most of the original cast and directed by Joe Mantello, who had also directed the stage production.

75, 76, 77, 78

Advertisement for *Master Class* featuring Patti LuPone and Zoe Caldwell, 1996

Terrence McNally Papers

Unidentified Photographers

Photographs from the opening of *Master Class* on Broadway featuring Zoe Caldwell and Audra McDonald, 1995

Gelatin silver prints

Terrence McNally Papers

Film clips of the original stage production of *Master Class*, 1995

After attending a master class at Lincoln Center given by the great American soprano Leontyne Price, McNally conceived of a new play that imagined a similar class taught by Maria Callas. Callas was one of the great opera divas of the twentieth century, and had been a personal passion of McNally's since he was a teenager in Corpus Christi, where he first heard her voice on the radio in a live performance of *Rigoletto* from Mexico City. Callas' talents and dramatic personality onstage and off made her a gay icon. McNally's play imagines the audience as the students of the class, with Callas (originally played by Zoe Caldwell) sharing stories of her life while instructing her students on technique. The play helped launch the career of Broadway icon Audra McDonald, and the role of Callas would

also be played by Patti LuPone, Dixie Carter, and Faye Dunaway. *Master Class* earned McNally another Tony Award for Best Play, Best Actress for Caldwell, and Best Featured Actress for McDonald.

79, 80

First page of the musical treatment for *Ragtime*, 1994

Terrence McNally Papers

Faxed notes on the *Ragtime* script from Lynn Ahrens to Stephen Flaherty and Terrence McNally, 1997

Terrence McNally Papers

When McNally was approached to write the book for a musical adaptation of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, he wanted to be sure the novelist would approve of his approach. McNally wrote a treatment outlining his vision of the story as a musical. Doctorow approved, and the work began. Composer Stephen Flaherty and lyricist Lynn Ahrens were chosen after submitting four songs based on McNally's original treatment. Their sweeping historical survey of turn-of-the-century America has been in constant production around the world ever since. Featuring characters like Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, Henry Ford, and Evelyn Nesbitt, the cast included Brian Stokes Mitchell, Audra McDonald, and Marin Mazzie.

McNally has described his musical-writing process as beginning with an over-written script from which the composer and lyricist begin to develop the songs. Over a period of time, they continue shaping the story to strengthen particular characters and tighten the plot, as can be seen in these notes from Ahrens to Flaherty and McNally.

81, 82

Joan Marcus (American, b. 1953)

[*Corpus Christi* at Manhattan Theatre Club], 1998

Gelatin silver print

Terrence McNally Papers

News coverage regarding *Corpus Christi* protests, 1998

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's next play was one of his most controversial. *Corpus Christi* is a passion play about Jesus Christ and His disciples imagined as gay men living in Corpus Christi, Texas in the 1950s. Before it ever opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club, vocal and threatening protests from religious groups nearly forced the play's cancellation. After receiving numerous bomb threats, Manhattan Theatre Club announced the cancellation out of fear for the safety of audiences and company members. Following counter-protests from the theatre community—including fellow playwrights Athol Fugard and Tony Kushner—the play was put back on the season's calendar. An open letter signed by 30 major figures of the theatre community including Arthur Miller, Wendy Wasserstein, and Stephen Sondheim applauded Manhattan Theatre Club for making "a brave and honorable decision, unquestionably difficult to make." *Corpus Christi* opened on October 13, 1998, the day after the homophobic murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. The production, as well as numerous other subsequent productions, was picketed by religious groups. Richard Zoglin in *Time* magazine called the play "one of McNally's best, most moving and personal works," describing it as "witty but not patronizing."

83, 84

Felix Sanchez (American, 1963–)
[*Dead Man Walking* at Houston Opera], 2011
Inkjet reproduction
Terrence McNally Papers

Unidentified Photographer
Photograph of Jake Heggie, Sister Helen Prejean, and Terrence McNally, ca. 2000
Gelatin silver print
Terrence McNally Papers

As the twenty-first century began, McNally turned to opera, not just as a topic, but as a form. Collaborating with composer Jake Heggie, the two adapted Sister Helen Prejean's 1993 book *Dead Man Walking* about Prejean's journey with a death row inmate. It premiered on October 7, 2000 with the San Francisco Opera. It has now been performed on five continents and has become the most frequently produced contemporary American opera. Writing in *Opera News*, Andrew Mellor declared "*Dead Man Walking* will

remain an indispensable part of the European as well as American repertory....” It will make its Metropolitan Opera debut in 2020 in a new production featuring Joyce DiDonato and conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. McNally and Heggie also collaborated on *Great Scott*, commissioned by The Dallas Opera, where it premiered in 2015.

85, 86, 87

Original working notebook for *The Visit*, ca. 1999

Terrence McNally Papers

Fax notes from John Kander to Terrence McNally regarding lyrics for *The Visit*, 2003

Terrence McNally Papers

Based on Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s play *Der Besuch der alten Dame*, McNally again teamed-up with John Kander and Fred Ebb to create *The Visit*, a production over 15 years in the making. It was originally envisioned as a vehicle for Angela Lansbury (McNally’s archive includes notes from the celebrated actress) in 2001, but she ultimately withdrew from the project when her husband became ill. The musical opened in Chicago in 2001 with Chita Rivera in the lead role, but the impact of the September 11th terror attacks on Broadway kept the production from being transferred. Over the next decade, the team revised *The Visit* and worked to get a major New York production of it staged even after Fred Ebb’s death in 2004. In 2015, it finally got its Broadway production with Rivera starring opposite Roger Rees in what would be his last stage role.

88, 89

Typescript draft page of *Anastasia* with revisions, 2015

Terrence McNally Papers

Matthew Murphy (American, 1986–)

[*Anastasia* with Derek Klena and Christy Altomare], 2017

Inkjet reproduction

Terrence McNally Papers

As early as 2011, McNally teamed up again with Lynn Aherns and Stephen Flaherty to adapt the 1997 animated film *Anastasia* for the stage. Based on the legend that the Russian Grand Duchess Anastasia escaped execution after the Russian Revolution, the musical includes some of the original songs from the animated film, but greatly expands the story and musical score to create a work that stands on its own. After a series of workshops and preview performances, *Anastasia* opened on Broadway on March 23, 2017 and continues to run at the Broadhurst Theatre. A national tour launched in October 2018. It is scheduled for twenty separate overseas productions.

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Unidentified Photographer

Photograph of Terrence McNally and Tom Kirdahy, ca. 2016

Inkjet reproduction

Terrence McNally Papers

Article “Strong Support is Found for Ban on Gay Marriage” from *The New York Times*, 2003

Terrence McNally Papers

In the midst of a national debate on same-sex marriage, Terrence McNally married his husband Tom Kirdahy in a civil union ceremony in Vermont in 2003. After same-sex marriage was legally recognized in the District of Columbia in December 2009, the two were legally married on April 6, 2010. They met in 2001 when Kirdahy organized a panel discussion on gay theatre that included Edward Albee, Lanford Wilson, and McNally. Kirdahy, then an attorney for non-profit AIDS organizations, is now a successful New York theatre producer.

92, 93, 94, 95, 96

Lucille Lortel Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award, 2015

On loan from Terrence McNally

Tony Award, Best Book of a Musical for *Kiss of a Spiderwoman*, 1993

On loan from Terrence McNally

Tony Award, Best Play for *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, 1995

On loan from Terrence McNally

Tony Award, Best Play for *Master Class*, 1996

On loan from Terrence McNally

Tony Award, Best Book of a Musical for *Ragtime*, 1998

On loan from Terrence McNally

97, 98

Typescript draft of *Fire and Air*, 2017

Terrence McNally Papers

John Doyle (Scottish, b. 1953)

Scene design for *Fire and Air* at Classic Stage Company, 2018

Inkjet print

Terrence McNally Papers

McNally's most recent play, *Fire and Air*, explores the relationship between famed Ballets Russes impresario Sergei Diaghilev and his protégé and lover Vaslav Nijinsky. It premiered in January 2018 at New York's Classic Stage Company. Manuscripts of the play are already part of McNally's archive at the Ransom Center.

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Now firmly in the digital age, the physical contents of a writer's archive have changed dramatically in the last 25 years. Like many other archives at the Ransom Center, the Terrence McNally Papers include disks, hard drives, flash drives, and CDs that contain everything from manuscript drafts and notes to email. Led by our digital archivist, Ransom Center staff work to capture the contents of digital media to preserve these materials and make them accessible in perpetuity.