

Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles



Delbert Mann, Uncut

An Oscar-winning director shares vignettes from an era when quality mattered more than ratings. By RAY WADDLE, MA'81

BATCH BY BATCH, YEAR AFTER year, Hollywood director Delbert Mann delivered the off-camera artifacts of a charmed, crowded career—TV scripts, film cast lists, celebrity photos, memoirs—to Vanderbilt.

In Box 5 you'll find scripts for the 1957 movies *Desire Under the Elms* and *Lee at Gettysburg*. Boxes 92–94 feature five volumes of memoir. Box 70 contains background papers for a 1965 film he almost did: *The Oskar Schindler Story*.

The files provide a glimpse of Hollywood magic but also a hard look at the real work behind the glamour.

And they provide something else: a tour through post-war American culture, as witnessed by a tall, bashful Nashville kid who adored community theater, helped shape the golden age of live television in the 1940s, soared into motion pictures in the 1950s, and later pioneered made-for-TV dramas.

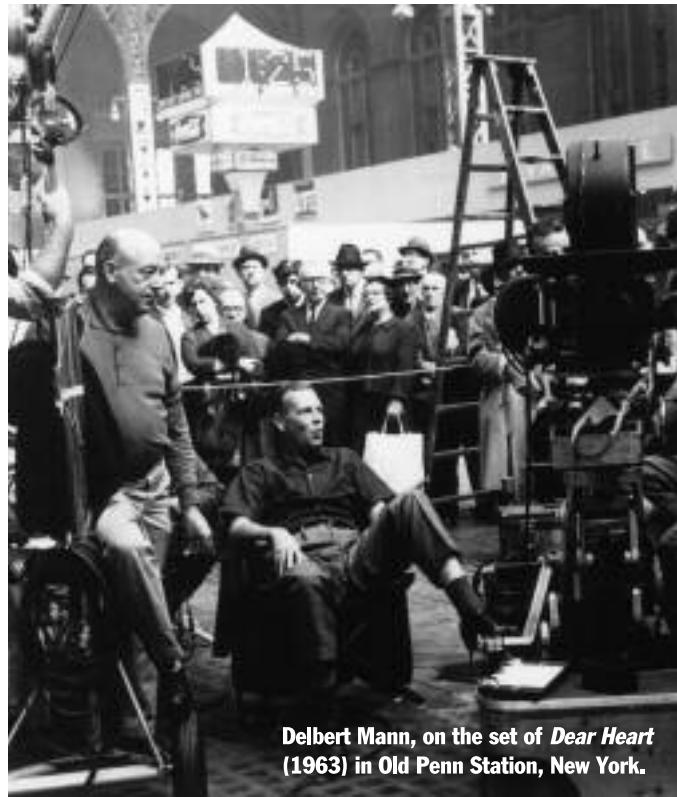
The Papers of Delbert Mann, 175 boxes' worth, today serves as a cornerstone of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library's Special Collections Department. The collection is nationally known as a meticulous, precocious exam-

ple of early TV and film documentation, attracting scholars, students and budding directors who come to sift through the primary materials of an extraordinary career that began in Nashville nearly 70 years ago.

"Mr. Mann is a very thorough director who had a sense of history about what he was doing," says Kathy Smith, associate university archivist.

Turning 86 this year, Mann still resides in Los Angeles. The boxes come less frequently now, but they all made their way to Van-

derbilt because of Mann's abiding affection for the university and the city. He is a 1941 graduate (B.A. in political science) who became a member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust in 1962 at the height of his career. He remains on the board, with emer-



itus status. For years, during regular board meetings, the Special Collections staff looked forward to a visit from Mann, who would drop off his latest bundle of manuscripts for the mounting collection. "Vanderbilt gave me everything—a sense of myself, the courage to pursue dreams, a liberal, non-career-oriented education," Mann says.

Delbert Mann was born in Lawrence, Kan., in 1920 but moved with his family to Nashville for his high school years, where he attended Hume-Fogg High and got hooked on the school's drama club. He credits a teacher, Inez Alder, who directed the school plays and taught him to overcome his shyness as a public speaker.

At Vanderbilt he slogged through course work and met his future wife, Ann Gillespie, but he never shook the theater bug. The university had no dramatic arts curriculum then, so he found an off-campus outlet for his passion with local community theater. There he met mentors, notably Fred Coe, who would become a television director and one day give Mann his first directing break. (In the late 1980s, Mann estab-

lished the Fred Coe Artist-in-Residence Series at Vanderbilt to honor his friend.) After Vanderbilt graduation, though, World War II interrupted everything. Mann flew B-24 bombers over Germany, a daily risk of life. When he witnessed the mid-air

explosion of a nearby bomber in his own squadron, killing the 10-man crew, he made a sudden decision.

"Succeed or not, I simply had to at least try to do what I really wanted to do," he declares in an essay for the catalog called *The Papers of Delbert Mann*.

That meant giving professional theater a try. Mere months after the war's end, on Coe's recommendation, Mann arrived at Yale Drama School, immersing himself in the technicalities of stage and theater.

In 1949 Coe invited Mann to New York to become a director for him in the world of "an astonishing new miracle, live television." Mann had never seen a TV show, been in a studio, or owned a TV set. But he recognized its similarities to theater. Live TV meant no retakes, no room for error—a "trapeze work without a net," he says. And the audience added an exciting dimension, as they shifted from passive viewers to active participants in something unique and unrepeatable. Mann dove in, directing dozens of hour-long productions at NBC for *Playhouse 90* and other prestigious venues.

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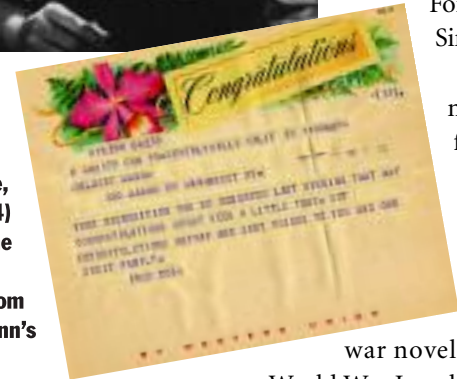


The Mann Papers chronicle these years. Boxes contain correspondence, scripts, cast lists and scene breakdowns for more than 100 TV productions, including *Darkness at Noon*, *Our Town*, *Vincent Van Gogh*, and *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*. There are video copies of his TV dramas and movies. Yet the heart of the holdings is his multi-volume memoir manuscript, some 1,400 pages, which take the reader through his TV days and film career. (A shorter, published version is his 1998 autobiography, *Looking Back ... at Live Television and Other Matters*.)

"Live television was unique," he explains



Opposite page, top: set design sketches from *Middle of the Night* (1959); this page, clockwise: *Marty* (1954) starring Ernest Borgnine and Betsy Blair; a congratulatory telegram from Fred Coe regarding Mann's best director Oscar for *Marty*; a set design for the Assembly Room in *Jane Eyre* (1971)



but pressured circumstances." One of those early TV shows, in 1953, was the story of a lonely Bronx butcher named Marty. A year later Mann would get the chance to reshoot it as a feature-length film. *Marty*, the movie starring Ernest Borgnine, was revolutionary. In an era of big-budget escapism, film noir and war propaganda, here was a quiet movie about ordinary people, their romantic dreams and family dilemmas. It won Oscars for best picture, best actor (Borgnine) and screenwriting (Paddy Chayefsky)—and for the director, one Delbert Mann. It was his first movie.

"They disappeared by the dozens despite all efforts of our wardrobe department to check them in along with other items of attire at the end of each day," Mann writes in the memoir. "The extras learned one English word, spoken with a dramatic shrug of the shoulder: 'Lost!' We had practically no caps left by the end of the shooting."

"This was something new, a movie about real life," says Sarah Howell, a retired professor of social history at Middle Tennessee State University, who has researched Mann's career. "It suddenly made Mann a national figure. But he remained very versatile. He was friendly, supportive of his actors, but he also had high standards."

He worked with all the big names—Cary Grant, Sophia Loren, Burt Lancaster, David Niven, Eva Marie Saint, Bogart and Bacall. His own favorite actors included Fredric March, Henry Fonda, Lee Remick and Jean Simmons.

The collection includes materials from a 1979 made-for-TV movie, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which Mann considers his most rewarding and challenging film. It was based on

Erich Remarque's anti-war novel about the slaughters of World War I—a book close to the heart of Mann's father, Delbert Sr., who had been a teacher at Nashville's Scarritt College. He had served as a medical orderly in France during the Great War and saw the suffering done by trench warfare and mustard gas. The son honored the father with a realistic movie rendition shot in Czechoslovakia, an Iron Curtain nation where the book was much beloved. Film officials there urged Mann to come. But this was in the middle of the Cold War; shipping explosives from England into Eastern Europe for the battle reenactments took delicate diplomacy with the skeptical Soviet-style security forces.

And there was the matter of the missing German army hats. Living in Brezhnevian deprivation, the Czech extras kept stealing them.

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class farewells were free-for-all of socializing and friendships in the making.

Sometimes the prisoners wanted to talk about the stresses of their world behind bars. Other times they were eager to leave their inmate identities behind for a while and just be students. Discussion centered on the weekly reading assigned—essays on sainthood or religious violence—or a sample of their own writing to share with the class. Once class time got started, someone would usually speak from the heart and silence the room.

One week I assigned them all to write a “This I Believe” essay of personal belief and submit it to National Public Radio. One divinity student wrote about confronting his fears and discovering trust in God. Another wrote about the strong example of her mother as a mentor. But the essay I chose to read to the class was by inmate Tom, a gruff (in truth, he was suffering chronic back pain) prison veteran who’d been incarcerated more than three decades.

Surprising everyone, he wrote a piece about the healing power of touch. This was surely not the easiest subject to write about in the macho, posturing culture of a men’s prison. But he was undeterred. He declared he learned the power of touch from his mother, who “had an enormous capacity to communicate love, empathy, trust, encouragement and support with only a touch of her soft hands and an embrace of her arms.”

He concluded: “I am an equal opportunity practitioner to both genders and to all ages, races, nationalities and religious faiths. Despite an occasional crude comment from a stranger that something must be wrong with me for exhibiting such an unmasculine practice, I am unashamed and unrepentant. I believe we are on this earth to hold and comfort one another, to love and respect each other as brothers and sisters of the same Creator.

“One way I manifest God’s light in me is to express it with the power of touch, a physical gesture that says, ‘I understand,’ ‘I care,’ ‘I love,’ and ‘You are not alone.’ If I can continue this spiritual practice in a crowded Southern prison for more than 30 years, it can succeed anywhere.”

I read the essay aloud and noticed tears in the eyes of some divinity students. Suddenly, this Riverbend inmate was a fellow human

being, a man with a family past, with a core of empathy, a yearning to heal his world. We all made Tom promise he would submit his essay to NPR. I hope the nation gets to hear his voice someday.

I get two questions from outsiders about this unusual class. First, did the prisoners pay for their textbooks? No. They don’t have the money. It’s up to the teacher to purchase the books or get a discount from the publisher. In my case, a generous friend came forward as a benefactor, writing a check to cover the cost of two dozen texts as well as some writing reference books for the bedraggled prison library.

The second question is always nervously posed: Was there a guard in the room in case of “trouble”? No, a guard was stationed down the hall, never in class. I never gave the matter thought. I was too busy running a class of serious writers.

But we visitors were all aware that these prisoners were convicted of awful crimes. Over the course of the semester, some prisoners disclosed details from time to time. Others did not. We learned that one was convicted of multiple sexual abuse, another had killed two people, and others were sentenced to long terms for rape, armed robbery or homicide.

The emotions of a prison visit are complicated, I admit. I don’t minimize the violence the inmates did to their victims and the victims’ families. I won’t sentimentalize their own current states of reform, impressive though they are. But any visitor is confronted with a soul-searching question: Are these prisoners real human beings or not? Will I equate them with their crimes—that is, with the worst thing they’ve ever done—or are they something more than that?

Society doesn’t want to deal with the question. The prevailing national philosophy of incarceration is one of revenge, not rehabilitation. Maximize the sentences, lock them up, and forget this “silent nation growing inside us,” as writer E.L. Doctorow describes our burgeoning, costly prison population.

But for several weeks this year, I saw a different side to the darkness, a room full of prisoners in conversation with free-worlders, all writers, all equals in their effort to come to terms with their experiences and re-imagine old questions of faith and truth.

These students often invoked the example

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The Mann Papers paint a detailed picture of both the painstaking organizational skills and big-picture vision required of a modern director. He or she must manage an unpredictable team of actors and crew, vet the script, tell a compelling visual story, and stay on schedule and budget.

With the Delbert Mann collection, students encounter the work of one of Hollywood’s beloved directors, one of the nice guys in a tough business who, according to admirers, made his family (four children) a priority and stayed in touch with Nashville friends across the decades.

“I’m a lucky man,” he declares. “I have been able to spend my life doing what I love to do the most.”

And he’s sharing it with his alma mater.

of Jesus. In the New Testament, oddly, criminal-justice issues keep turning up in the gospel story. John the Baptist went to jail. So did Paul. Jesus began his ministry with words from Isaiah, proclaiming “release to the captives.” And he was ensnared as a criminal in his last days. Some argue that those final hours on the cross with two other condemned men constituted the faith’s first church service.

Jesus also said, Visit the prisoners. He didn’t theorize about policies of incarceration. He said visit them.

Meeting for class on Monday after Easter, we learned from the Riverbend guys that they were refused all visitors at Easter this year because of a sudden lock-down by the prison. This was traumatic to the prisoners who depend on that vital family circle outside the walls. One prisoner in the class said he was gratified that his “Vanderbilt family” was there that night after the unnerving snafu of the day before.

At that moment I knew for sure that these Vanderbilt-Riverbend classes are something more than seminars and adventures in learning. They’re experiments in mutual respect across the difficult politics of race, class and fear in a nation determined to build bigger prisons every day.

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