Collection Summary

Title: May O'Donnell Papers
Span Dates: 1929-2004
Bulk Dates: (bulk 1937-1984)
Call No.: ML31.O35
Creator: O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004
Extent: 160 items
Extent: 1 container
Extent: 0.5 linear feet
Language: Collection material in English
Location: Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
LC Catalog record: https://lccn.loc.gov/2013572149

Summary: May O'Donnell was an American dancer, choreographer, and teacher; she performed in the original casts of seminal works by Martha Graham, and through her own choreography became known as among the earliest choreographers of abstract works. Her husband, Ray Green, composed music for many of her dance works. This small collection offers photographs, playbills and publicity, and reviews and other publications documenting some of her most distinctive achievements.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

People
Blechman, Marcus.
Falkenstein, Claire, 1908-1997.
Fonoroff, Nina.
Geraci, A. John.
Gill, Alice.
Graham, Martha.
Green, Ray, 1908-1997--Photographs.
Hawkins, Erick.
Horosko, Marian.
Limón, José.
Lindquist, John.
Lushington, Nancy.
Nilva, Daniel.
Reed, Estelle.
Shurr, Gertrude.

Organizations
CBS Cable.
Martha Graham Dance Company.
Romaine Studio.

Subjects
Choreographers--United States.
Dance companies--United States.
Dance--Photographs.
Dancers--United States.
Modern dance--United States.
Women choreographers.

**Titles**

*Appalachian spring* (Choreographic work: Graham)
*Cave of the heart* (Choreographic work: Graham)
*Celebration* (Choreographic work: Graham)
*Cornerstone* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Course* (Choreographic work: Graham)
*Dance concerto* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Dance energies* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Homage to Shiva* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Illuminations* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Incredible adventure* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Queen's obsession* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*Suspension* (Choreographic work: O'Donnell)
*This story is legend* (Choreographic work: Limón and O'Donnell)
*Three inventories on Casey Jones* (Choreographic work: Limón and O'Donnell)

**Form/Genre**

Clippings (Information artifacts)
Photographic prints.
Programs (Documents)
Promotional materials.

**Provenance**

Gift; Estate of May O'Donnell; 2005

**Accruals**

No further accruals are expected.

**Processing History**

The May O'Donnell Papers was processed in 2008 by Elizabeth Aldrich. The finding aid was updated and coded for EAD format by Libby Smigel in 2016.

**Transfers**

One compact disc of composer Ray Green's music titled *Ray Green and His Music* has been transferred to the Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound division, where access must be requested in advance through the Recorded Sound Reference Center.

**Other Repositories**

The May O'Donnell and Ray Green Papers at the Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, contains correspondence, choreographic notes, scores, photographs, and other materials relating to the professional and personal lives of the couple. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin and the Newberry Library...
both have small collections with a finding aid. The Claire Falkenstein Papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, contains correspondence with Falkenstein who designed many sets and costumes for O'Donnell's choreography.

Related Material

Several recordings of May O'Donnell's choreography (Concerto, Dance Energies, Homage to Shiva, and Vibrations), submitted as copyright deposits, can be viewed by advance request in the Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, and a two-hour interview of May O'Donnell by Sali Ann Kriegsman in 1977 is available through the Recorded Sound Reference Center, both in the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. The Martha Graham Collection in the Music Division at the Library of Congress contains additional photographs of May O'Donnell appearing in works choreographed by Graham.

Copyright Status

Materials from the May O'Donnell Papers are governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.) and other applicable international copyright laws.

Access and Restrictions

The May O'Donnell Papers is open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Music Division prior to visiting in order to determine whether the desired materials will be available at that time.

Certain restrictions to use or copying of materials may apply.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: [item, date, container number], May O'Donnell Papers, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1906, May 1</td>
<td>Born, Sacramento, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Began dance training with Michio Ito and Estelle Reed in San Francisco, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-1931</td>
<td>Performed with Estelle Reed's dance company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-1938</td>
<td>Member of the Martha Graham Dance Company. Appeared in Heretic, Primitive Mysteries, Celebration, Course, Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Premieres of Dance Energies and Of Pioneer Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Married composer Ray Green (died 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moved to San Francisco, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Co-founded San Francisco Dance Theatre with Ray Green and choreographer Gertrude Shurr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-1942</td>
<td>Concerts in San Francisco and on tour with José Limón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-choreographed Three Inventories of Casey Jones and This Story Is Legend with Limón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choreographed Cornerstone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Premiere of Suspension, with original music by Ray Green and set mobile by artist Claire Falkenstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-founded Shurr-O'Donnell Dance Studio, New York City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944-1952</td>
<td>Guest artist with the Martha Graham Dance Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Created roles of Pioneer Woman in Appalachian Spring and Attendant in Heriodiade in 1944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Created roles of She of the Earth in Dark Meadow and the Chorus in Cave of the Heart in 1946</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1945
Joint performance programs with Nina Fonaroff
Joint performance programs with Erick Hawkins
Choreographed two solos, Running Set and Theme and Variations, with music by Ray Green

1946
Choreographed Horizon Song, with music by Ray Green

1949
Premiere of Celtic Ritual, with music of Henry Cowell

1952
Premiere of The Queen's Obsession, based on Macbeth (later revised)

1954
Premieres of Dance Concerto and Incredible Adventure

1956
Premiere of Illuminations, with music from Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5

1959
Premiere of Dance Energies

1959-1961
Summer teaching engagements and performances at University of California

1961
Company performances with Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra and Knoxville Symphony Orchestra
Retired from performing

1974
Founded May O'Donnell Concert Dance Company

1980
Premiere of Homage to Shiva with traditional music

1984
Premiere of Powers of Ten

1988
Premiere of Etudes and Scherzos

1993
Last concert performance by her company

2002
Awarded Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Prize

2004, Feb. 1
Died, New York City

Scope and Content Note

The materials among the May O'Donnell Papers partially document the career of a modern dancer, choreographer, and teacher, considered a pioneer in the development of American modern dance, especially abstract dance. The materials are organized in one box with three series: Photographs, Programs and Publicity, and Clippings and Printed Material.

The Photographs series depicts O'Donnell alone, as a performer, with other artists, and with her spouse, Ray Green. In addition to several photographs documenting her appearance in seminal productions of Martha Graham choreography, this series includes photographs of her best-known works: Suspension (1943); Dance Concerto (1954); Dance Energies (1959 staging), and others. Many of the photographs of the 1940s are credited to the Romaine Studio, the San Francisco photography studio established by former vaudeville dancers Karl and Emilie Romaine. Photographers Marcus Blechman, John Lindquist, Daniel Nilva, and Chris Alexander are represented in the collection.

Programs and Publicity items range from 1929 to 1988, including playbills and performance programs, program notes, flyers, press releases, and brochures. The collection holds several important programs that are considered rare, including examples of O'Donnell’s 1930s performances for dancer-choreographer Estelle Reed; programs from her 1940s collaborations with José Limón and from a concert with Nina Fonaroff; and a program titled "American Dance" from a 1953 concert at New York’s Alvin Theatre that included choreographic works by O'Donnell, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Doris Humphrey, Pearl Lang, Helen McGehee, Fonaroff, and Limón. Playbills of O'Donnell's company from the 1950s document early-career performances by distinguished artists such as Gerald Arpino, Robert Joffrey, Dudley Williams, Mabel Robinson, and Norman Walker. A brochure and gala program commemorating the ground-breaking 1980s CBS Cable arts programming are included, as are promotional announcements of some of her workshops and teaching engagements.

Reviews, a published interview with May O’Donnell, and an obituary comprise the series Clippings and Printed Material.

Organization of the May O'Donnell Papers

The collection is organized in three series:

• Photographs, 1934-1980s
• Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988

May O'Donnell Papers
• Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004
## Description of Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1</td>
<td><strong>Photographs, 1934-1980s</strong></td>
<td>Photographs are divided into performance and miscellaneous photographs. Performance photos include those where the choreography is identified. Most photographs show May O'Donnell or her company in performance, mid-1930s to the 1980s. Unless otherwise specified, choreography is by O'Donnell. Arranged alphabetically by title of the pictured choreographic work, followed by a folder of miscellaneous or unidentified photos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1 MAPCASE 4</td>
<td><strong>Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988</strong></td>
<td>Playbills, program notes, press releases, and other materials used to promote performances, teaching workshops, and other activities of May O'Donnell or her dance companies. Arranged chronologically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1</td>
<td><strong>Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004</strong></td>
<td>Chiefly reviews of May O'Donnell as performer or choreographer, including an issue of <em>Dance Observer</em> featuring her with a cover photograph. Arranged chronologically.</td>
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Arranged alphabetically by title of the pictured choreographic work, followed by a folder of miscellaneous or unidentified photos. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/1 | Appalachian Spring, 1944  
Martha Graham choreography. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/2 | Cave of the Heart, 1946  
Martha Graham choreography. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/3 | Celebration, 1934  
Martha Graham choreography. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/4 | Celtic Ritual, 1949 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/5 | Cornerstone, circa 1939 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/6 | Course, 1935  
Martha Graham choreography. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/7 | Dance Concerto, 1954, 1980s |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/8 | Dance Energies, 1959 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/9 | Homage to Shiva, 1980 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/10 | Horizon Song, 1949? |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/11 | Illuminations, 1956 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/12 | Incredible Adventure, 1954 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/13 | The Queen's Obsession, 1958 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/14 | Suspension, 1950s, 1970s |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/15 | This Story Is Legend, 1941  
Co-choreographed with José Limón. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/16 | Three Inventories of Casey Jones, 1939  
Co-choreographed with José Limón. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/17 | Miscellaneous, 1930s, 1944-1945, 1977-1980s  
Includes studio portraits, personal photos, Bennington summer workshop. |
| BOX 1 MAPCASE 4 | **Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988**  
Playbills, program notes, press releases, and other materials used to promote performances, teaching workshops, and other activities of May O'Donnell or her dance companies. Arranged chronologically. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/18 | 1929-1931  
Contains: Estelle Reed Dance Group programs for San Francisco, Amsterdam (in Dutch), and Paris (in French). |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/19 | 1941-1949  
Includes Limón-O'Donnell and Fonaroff-O'Donnell programs. |
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Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988

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<th>Container</th>
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| BOX-FOLDER 1/20 | 1951-1959  
Playbills, program notes, press releases, brochures for performances and workshops in New York City and elsewhere. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/21 | 1960-1964, undated  
Programs, promotional letter. Includes performances with Kansas City Philharmonic and Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/22 | 1975-1979  
| BOX-FOLDER 1/23 | 1980-1988, undated  
Programs and announcements for performances at the Joyce Theater, American Dance Festival, and Bennington College. Includes invitation for CBS Cable gala and engagement letter for adjudication of Educational Testing Service's Arts Recognition and Talent Search. |
| MAPCASE-DRAWER 4/15 | CBS Cable brochure for arts series, 1981 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/24 | Tribute performance program, 1996  
Cleveland Ballet/Dancing Wheels event and performance honoring O'Donnell's 90th Birthday. |
| BOX 1 | Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004  
Chiefly reviews of May O'Donnell as performer or choreographer, including an issue of Dance Observer featuring her with a cover photograph.  
Arranged chronologically. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/25 | Reviews, 1941-1945  
O'Donnell with Martha Graham Dance Company and concerts with José Limón. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/26 | Reviews, 1951-1958  
Chiefly reviews of May O'Donnell dance company performances. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/27 | Periodical features, 1953-1955  
| BOX-FOLDER 1/28 | Reviews, 1960-1961 |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/29 | Reviews, 1971-1978, undated |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/30 | Reviews, 1980-1984 |
Interview by Marian Horosko, Dance Chronicle, Vol. 26, no. 2. |
| BOX-FOLDER 1/32 | Obituary, 2004  