

# May O'Donnell Papers

Guides to Special Collections in the Music Division of the Library of Congress



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Washington, D.C.  
2008

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Processed by the Music Division of the Library of Congress

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Music Division, 2016

## 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.

Fonaroff, Nina.

Geraci, A. John.

Gill, Alice.

Graham, Martha.

Green, Ray, 1908-1997--Photographs.

Green, Ray, 1908-1997.

Hawkins, Erick.

Horosko, Marian.

Limón, José.

Lindquist, John.

Lushington, Nancy.

Nilva, Daniel.

O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004--Archives.

O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004--Photographs.

O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004.

O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004.

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

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

1945	Joint performance programs with Nina Fonaroff Joint performance programs with Erick Hawkins Choreographed two solos, <i>Running Set</i> and <i>Theme and Variations</i> , with music by Ray Green
1946	Choreographed <i>Horizon Song</i> , with music by Ray Green
1949	Premiere of <i>Celtic Ritual</i> , with music of Henry Cowell
1952	Premiere of <i>The Queen's Obsession</i> , based on <i>Macbeth</i> (later revised)
1954	Premieres of <i>Dance Concerto</i> and <i>Incredible Adventure</i>
1956	Premiere of <i>Illuminations</i> , with music from Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5
1959	Premiere of <i>Dance Energies</i>
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 <i>Homage to Shiva</i> with traditional music
1984	Premiere of <i>Powers of Ten</i>
1988	Premiere of <i>Etudes and Scherzos</i>
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](#)

- Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004

## Description of Series

Container	Series
BOX 1	<p><b><u>Photographs, 1934-1980s</u></b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Arranged alphabetically by title of the pictured choreographic work, followed by a folder of miscellaneous or unidentified photos.</p>
BOX 1 MAPCASE 4	<p><b><u>Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988</u></b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 1	<p><b><u>Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004</u></b></p> <p>Chiefly reviews of May O'Donnell as performer or choreographer, including an issue of <i>Dance Observer</i> featuring her with a cover photograph.</p> <p>Arranged chronologically.</p>

# Container List

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<b>BOX 1</b>	<p><b>Photographs, 1934-1980s</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Arranged alphabetically by title of the pictured choreographic work, followed by a folder of miscellaneous or unidentified photos.</p>
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/1</b>	Appalachian Spring, 1944 Martha Graham choreography.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/2</b>	Cave of the Heart, 1946 Martha Graham choreography.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/3</b>	Celebration, 1934 Martha Graham choreography.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/4</b>	Celtic Ritual, 1949
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/5</b>	Cornerstone, circa 1939
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/6</b>	Course, 1935 Martha Graham choreography.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/7</b>	Dance Concerto, 1954, 1980s
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/8</b>	Dance Energies, 1959
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/9</b>	Homage to Shiva, 1980
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/10</b>	Horizon Song, 1949?
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/11</b>	Illuminations, 1956
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/12</b>	Incredible Adventure, 1954
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/13</b>	The Queen's Obsession, 1958
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/14</b>	Suspension, 1950s, 1970s
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/15</b>	This Story Is Legend, 1941 Co-choreographed with José Limón.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/16</b>	Three Inventories of Casey Jones, 1939 Co-choreographed with José Limón.
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/17</b>	Miscellaneous, 1930s, 1944-1945, 1977-1980s Includes studio portraits, personal photos, Bennington summer workshop.
<b>BOX 1 MAPCASE 4</b>	<p><b>Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988</b></p> <p>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.</p>
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/18</b>	1929-1931 Contains: Estelle Reed Dance Group programs for San Francisco, Amsterdam (in Dutch), and Paris (in French).
<b>BOX-FOLDER 1/19</b>	1941-1949 Includes Limón-O'Donnell and Fonaroff-O'Donnell programs.



## Programs and Publicity, 1929-1988

Container	Contents
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 Includes programs for Jacob's Pillow and Clark Center Festivals and London, England, performances.
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	<b>Clippings and Printed Material, 1941-2004</b> Chiefly reviews of May O'Donnell as performer or choreographer, including an issue of <i>Dance Observer</i> 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 1953 issue of <i>Dance News</i> and 1955 issue of <i>Dance Observer</i> .
BOX-FOLDER 1/28	Reviews, 1960-1961
BOX-FOLDER 1/29	Reviews, 1971-1978, undated
BOX-FOLDER 1/30	Reviews, 1980-1984
BOX-FOLDER 1/31	"May O'Donnell: My Life in Dance, 1931-1951," 2003 Interview by Marian Horosko, <i>Dance Chronicle</i> , Vol. 26, no. 2.
BOX-FOLDER 1/32	Obituary, 2004 By Jennifer Dunning, <i>New York Times</i> , Feb. 7.