



The New York Public Library
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

Liljan Espenak papers

1920s-1988

(S) *MGZMD 331

Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2013

Summary

Creator: Espenak, Liljan

Title: Liljan Espenak papers

Date: 1920s-1988

Size: 4.45 linear feet (11 boxes)

Source: Donated by the Estate of Liljan Espenak, 2011.

Abstract: Liljan Espenak (1905-1988) was a dancer, instructor, dance therapist and author. Espenak was born in Norway. During the 1920s, she moved to Berlin to study under Mary Wigman. Espenak established her own dance school in Berlin. In the 1930s, Espenak left Germany due to pressure from the Nazis to become a collaborative artist. Espenak eventually established herself in the United States and resumed her career. She opened a dance studio and developed a second career as a dance therapist in New York City. The collection spans her multiple careers. The files, 1920s-1988, contain correspondence from family, friends, and colleagues.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

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Processing note: Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2013

Related Materials:

Ewald Schindler papers. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Creator History

Liljan Espenak (1905-1988) (also referred to as Lillian) was a dancer, instructor, dance therapist and author. Born in Norway, Espenak moved to Berlin for her career. She was a pupil of Mary Wigman, an expressionist dancer in Germany. During World War II, Espenak left Germany due to efforts by the Nazis to compel her to become a collaborative artist. After leaving Germany, in 1934, Espenak went to London to perform and choreograph with theatre groups.

In 1941, she immigrated to the United States. Once established, Espenak opened up the Espenak School, a dance studio, at the Playhouse Studio in New York City. The trade publication *Dance Magazine* photographed Espenak demonstrating a traditional Scandinavian folk dance for the cover of the June 1943 issue.

She developed another career as a recognized dance therapist. In this capacity, Espenak worked with physically and mentally disabled children and adults. In 1960, Espenak joined the faculty of New York Medical College and founded the first dance therapy department in the United States. This department was the Mental Retardation Institute (now the Westchester Institute for Human Development). Espenak published a book on her work *Dance Therapy: Theory and Application* (1981). She traveled extensively, lecturing on dance therapy. In 1988, Espenak died in New York City.

Scope and Content Note

The collection, dating from 1920s to 1988, documents the life and career of Liljan Espenak (1905-1988). The collection spans her career as a dance movement therapist, dancer, educator and author. The files contain letters from family, friends, and colleagues. Most of the early correspondence is written in German. There are some letters written in Norwegian and English from her family in Norway. The files also include love letters from Espenak to Charles Beland, a sergeant in the military during World War II.

The files indicate that Espenak maintained a life-long friendship with her mentor Mary Wigman, the expressionist German dancer, through correspondence and printed matter. Also evident was her attendance at the Mary Wigman conference in Berlin, 1986. Other prominent correspondents include Theo Gusten, the Dutch-German director; Stefan Laurent, Hungarian-American filmmaker; Felix H. Man, pioneer photojournalist; and Alexander Roda Roda, Austrian-Croatian writer.

Mostly through printed matter, the collection illustrates that Espenak also retained documentation of her career as a dancer and choreographer in Berlin, London, Paris and the United States. The files hold reviews of Espenak's performances, advertisements and promotions for the Espenak School in New York, programs choreographed by her, writings, and notes.

The latter half of the collection focuses on Espenak's career as a dance therapist for physically and mentally challenged and children and adults. There are research materials on dance and dance therapy, Espenak's lectures, correspondence, certificates, daybooks, appointment books, and a plaque recognizing her work as a dance and movement therapist. The files include several draft copies for the book *Dance Therapy: Theory and Application*, published in 1981.

Between 1984 and 1988, Espenak was in the process of writing another book titled *Man's Walk or The Walk*. Espenak's correspondence with her editor Mildred Navaretta indicates that this book would have been from a psychological or psychotherapist perspective. Her inspiration may have been prompted from teaching the art of walking to people in the performing arts. These files hold some preliminary

work for chapters I-III, information about future chapters, and photographs of Espenak demonstrating body movements on the barre.

The collection is in English with some materials in German and Norwegian.

Arrangement: The collection maintains the original order and is loosely arranged by professional activities.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Appointment books
Artifacts
Correspondence
Drawings
Manuscripts
Photographs

Occupations

Authors
Dance therapists
Dancers

Subjects

Dance therapy

Names

Gusten, Theo
Laurent, Stefan
Man, Felix H., 1893-1985
Roda Roda, 1872-1945
Wigman, Mary, 1886-1973

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- b. 3 f. 6 Articles About Espenak in Berlin 1927-1929
- b. 3 f. 7 Article About Gladys Espenak (sister)
- b. 3 f. 8 Dance Publications 1928
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- b. 11 f. 3-4 Drawings of Espenak 1937
- b. 3 f. 14 European Contract and Performances 1926-1941
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- b. 4 f. 5 Reviews of Espenak's Dance Improvisation Recitals 1955-1957
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- b. 4 f. 8-9 Articles on Espenak and Dance 1940s-1980s
- b. 4 f. 10 Printed Matter 1970s
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- Man, Felix H
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 - b. 5 f. 10 Philobiblon 1967
 - b. 5 f. 11-12 Man, Felix H. Hommage a Senefelder 1967
 - b. 5 f. 13 Article: Felix H. Man and Stefan Lorant 1971
 - b. 5 f. 14 Photograph Album 1931
 - b. 5 f. 15 Medallion 1976
- Dance Therapy Work
 - b. 6 f. 1 Ai-Lien, Tai 1972-1988
 - b. 6 f. 2 Applications for Dance Therapist Positions 1977-1980
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 - b. 6 f. 4 Certificates Awarded to Espenak for Dance Therapy 1966-1980
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 - b. 7 f. 5-8 Lectures on Dance Therapy 1967-1971
 - b. 7 f. 9 Memorium for Espenak 1989
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 - b. 8 f. 10 Published Book 1981
 - b. 9 f. 1-10 Final Corrected Draft 1981
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