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Guide to the

Nala Najan papers

1930-2002

(S) *MGZMD 288

Compiled by Lea Jordan, November 2011

Summary

Creator: Najan, Nala, 1932-2002

Title: Nala Najan papers, 1930-2002

Size: 6.38 linear feet (16 boxes)

Source: Donated by Deborah Chiel, 2002

Abstract: Nala Najan (1932-2002) was an American-born dancer, choreographer and writer who specialized in the traditional dances of India. The Nala Najan papers hold correspondence, contracts, diaries, programs, photographs, writings, and other files relating to the career and personal life of the artist.

Access: To request materials, please contact the Jerome Robbins Dance Division (dance@nypl.org) in advance.

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Preferred citation: Nala Najan papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library

Processing note

Magazine publications removed and returned to LPA. Medicare and tax documents deaccessioned. Collection foldered and arranged.

Creator history

Nala Najan (1932-2002) was an American-born dancer, choreographer and writer who specialized in the traditional dances of India. He was born Roberto Rivera in Pennsylvania. As a child he trained in violin, piano and Western dance forms, especially ballet. Attracted to Indian dance after seeing performances by Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis and later by Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar, he traveled to India as a teenager to study Bharata Natyam and traditional music as a disciple of the guru Muthukumara Pillai.

Upon returning to the United States, he settled in New York and began to perform at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts, as well as at cultural dance festivals across the country. In 1961 he founded the Nala Najan Dance Company, which had a short lived but well received series of performances.

Najan promoted American performances by Indian artists and organized the first American tour of Chhau dance, enlisting the help of Sol Hurok. In the 1970s, Najan became a full time dance critic and writer. He was an editor and contributor to *Arabesque* magazine and also wrote for *Sruti*, *Rasamajari*, and *Attendance*. He taught Indian dance during this time, passing his knowledge on to dancers such as Shrimathi Gina and Hadassah. Najan also held a formal post as a teacher at Stephen's College in 1971 and taught yoga in Italy for a year in 1979.

In the early 1980s he returned to New York City, where he cared for his ailing parents and continued to teach, write, and advocate for Indian dance in America. He remained in New York until his death in 2002.

Scope and content note

The Nala Najan papers hold correspondence, contracts, diaries, programs, photographs, writings, and other files relating to the career and personal life of the artist. Najan's correspondence spans 50 years and consists of personal and professional letters. Correspondence is arranged by date, with the exception of letters from Mohan Khokar, Joseph Levine, and Ted Shawn which Najan kept separately. Shawn was a supporter of Najan's early career, and the two fostered a strong friendship during their time working together at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in the 1960s. Also of interest within Najan's correspondence are letters composed while he was studying in Madras, India around 1953. There are letters home as well as those from individuals helping him in India, including a fortune telling letter insinuating that he was having trouble at the moment and not to make any drastic changes. His correspondence from 1963 coincides with another trip to India on which he traveled extensively and performed.

Najan's diaries detail his day to day activities. Though they are written in day planner or calendar style books, the entries were composed after the fact and are at times very detailed. These diaries document his trips to India and his struggles with the business of earning a living through dance. The entries dating from 1970 on are less descriptive.

The Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival files hold correspondence from festival staff, programs, mailers, handouts and other documents relating to Najan's participation. Najan not only performed at many of the festivals but was instrumental in introducing Indian born and trained artists to the festival stage.

The Nala Najan Dance Company materials contain correspondence, financial materials, program mock-ups, lists of dancers, and copies of press letters written by publicist Richard Pleasant, offering complimentary tickets to various dance luminaries and critics. His notes include information taken down during other's classes or lectures, as well as some handwritten choreographic notes, though this material is limited. His personal papers include family documents, copies of birth and death certificates, identification cards, and legal paperwork relating to Najan's 1985 mugging in New York City.

Najan's photographs consist of promotional shots – both of Najan dancing and of other dancers or artists whom he supported. There are some personal photographs, including school pictures of Najan and candid snapshots of his travels. The programs document events in which Najan was a performer or participant, as well as recitals that he attended or supported in some way. Even after Najan stopped dancing, he still appeared as a lecture guest, choreographer, or adviser in events into the 1980s.

Najan's writings files are made up of typed drafts, handwritten notes, and art clippings that eventually made their way into articles. There are no final copies of his writings in these papers. Often the drafts are unidentified or fragmentary.

Arrangement

Alphabetical by subject.

Key terms

Subjects

Dance -- History -- 20th century

Dance -- Study and teaching

Indian dance

Names

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Najan, Nala, 1932-2002

Special formats

Correspondence

Diaries

Notes

Photographs

Programs

Container list

b.1 f.1 Address Books, undated

Art

b.1 f.2 Drawings and Sketches by Others, undated

b.16 f.1 Oversize Drawings of Najan, 1961

b.1 f.3 The Asia Society, 1985-1995

b.15 Award - ArtsIndia, 2001

b.1 f.4 Chicago Dance Festival, undated (lighting presets)

b.1 f.5 Contracts, 1963-1974

Correspondence

General

b.1 f.6 1940-1949

b.1 f.7 1950-1959

b.1 f.8 1960-1963

b.1 f.9 1963

b.2 f.1 1964-1969

b.2 f.2 1970-1975

b.2 f.3 1976-1979

b.2 f.4 1980-1984

b.2 f.5 1985-1989

b.2 f.6 1990-1999

b.2 f.7 2000-2002

b.3 f.1 Khokar, Mohan, 1961-1962

b.3 f.2 Levine, Joseph, 1960-1961

b.3 f.3 Shawn, Ted, 1961-1968

b.3 f.4 Costume Designs, undated

b.3 f.5 Dance Congress, 1964

Diaries

b.3 f.6 1949

b.3 f.7 1951

b.3 f.8 1952

b.3 f.9 1953

b.4 f.1 1954

b.4 f.2 1957-1958

b.4 f.3 1958

b.4 f.4 1959

b.4 f.5 1960

b.4 f.6 1961

b.5 f.1 1962

b.5 f.2 1963

b.5 f.3 1964

b.5 f.4 1969

b.5 f.5 1970

Diaries (cont.)

- b.6 f.1 1971
- b.6 f.2 1975
- b.6 f.3 1977
- b.6 f.4 Education - Madras, India, 1952
- b.6 f.5 Ethnic Dance Arts, Inc., 1971-1977
- b.6 f.6 Ford Foundation Fellowship Application, 1961
- b.7 f.1-2 Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, 1960-1969
- b.7 f.3 Lectures, 1962

Nala Najan Dance Company

- b.7 f.4-6 General, 1961
- b.8 f.1-2 Financial Materials, 1961
- b.8 f.3 Press Correspondence, 1961

Notes

- b.8 f.4-6 General, undated

Dance

- b.9 f.1 General, undated
- b.9 f.2 *Chitra*, undated
- b.9 f.3 *Nagananda*, undated
- b.9 f.4 Personal Papers, 1930-1998

Photographs

Najan, Nala

- b.9 f.5-7 Dance, 1955-1975
- b.10 f.1 India, 1963
- b.10 f.2 Nala Najan and Company, 1961
- b.16 f.2 Oversize, 1940-1965
- b.10 f.3 Personal, 1940-1999

Other Performers

- b.10 f.4 General, 1950-1990
- b.10 f.5 Gina, Shrimathi, undated
- b.10 f.6 Shawn, Ted, 1960-1970
- b.10 f.7-8 Press Releases, 1958-1970

Programs

- b.11 f.1-3 Najan, Nala, 1956-1985
- b.11 f.4-5 Other Performers, 1950-1999
- b.12 f.1 Other Performers, 1950-1999
- b.12 f.2 The Society for Asian Music, 1961-1964
- b.12 f.3 Stephen's College, 1971-1987

Travel

- b.12 f.4-5 India, 1963

Travel (cont.)

- b.12 f.6 Italy, 1979-1980
- b.12 f.7 University of Minnesota International Festival, 1958

Writings

- b.13 f.1-2 Art Clippings, undated
 - Drafts
- b.13 f.3-7 General, undated
- b.13 f.8 *Deepti Gupta*, undated
- b.13 f.9 *Gopal Dubey Chhau Performance*, undated
- b.14 f.1-2 *Imageries: Reflections in a Golden Butterfly*, 2000
- b.14 f.3 *Indian Dance Explorations*, undated
- b.14 f.4 *The Marriage*, undated (unfinished novel)
- b.14 f.5 *Nala Najan on Ethnic Dance*, undated
- b.14 f.6-7 *Procession of Indian Dance*, undated
- b.14 f.8 *The Quincentennial Year: Indian Dance Celebrations in New York*, undated
- b.14 f.9 *Ratilekha: Devotee of Lord Jagannath*, undated
- b.14 f.10 Reviews, undated
- b.14 f.11 *Ritha Devi: Dancing Priestess of Love*, undated
- b.14 f.12 *Shrimathi Gina/ Gina Blau*, undated
- b.14 f.13 *The Wandering Child*, 1953