



The New York Public Library
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

Merrill Ashley papers

1950-2017

(S) *MGZMD 495

Processed by Matthew Snyder in 2019.

Summary

Creator: Ashley, Merrill

Title: Merrill Ashley papers

Date: 1950-2017

Size: 14.37 linear feet (39 boxes)

Source: Donated by Merrill Ashley, 2018.

Abstract: Merrill Ashley (1950 -) is an American ballerina who danced for 31 years with the New York City Ballet, most of them under George Balanchine. Her papers, dating from 1950 to 2017, document her career through ballet class and choreography notebooks; photographs; letters; diaries; book drafts and interview transcripts for her book *Dancing For Balanchine*; calendars and datebooks; programs and clippings; posters; artifacts such as pointe shoes; and books.

Conditions Governing Access:

Inquiries regarding audio and moving image materials in the collection may be directed to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division (dance@nypl.org). Audio and moving image materials will be subject to preservation assessment and migration prior to access.

Access to the diaries dated 1969 and 1972 in box 9, folder 4 is restricted until the death of Merrill Ashley.

Preferred citation: Merrill Ashley papers, (S) *MGZMD 495. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Matthew Snyder in 2019.

Creator History

Merrill Ashley (née Linda Merrill, 1950 -) is an American ballerina who danced for 31 years with the New York City Ballet, most of them under George Balanchine. The last ballerina to have fully trained and developed under Balanchine, she now advises companies and dancers staging his ballets around the world.

Ashley was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, and raised in Rutland, Vermont, where she began her ballet studies at the age of seven. In 1964, at the age of thirteen, she was awarded a scholarship to continue her training at the School of American Ballet as part of its Ford Foundation Scholarship program.

In 1967, George Balanchine invited Ashley to join the corps de ballet of the New York City Ballet, where she soon appeared in both corps and soloist roles in almost all of the ballets in the Company's repertory. In 1974, she was promoted to the rank of soloist, and three years later she became a principal dancer. Ashley danced her final performance with the Company as part of the Opening Night Benefit on November 25, 1997.

Balanchine choreographed both *Ballo della Regina* and *Ballade* for Ashley, and she also originated roles in Jerome Robbins' *Concertino* and *Brahms/Handel*, which he choreographed with Twyla Tharp. Her repertory included roles in ballets as diverse as Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*, *Firebird*, *The Nutcracker* (as both the Dewdrop and Sugarplum Fairy), *Prodigal Son* (as the Siren), *Serenade*, *Square Dance*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Swan Lake*, and *Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3* (in "Theme and Variations"), as well as Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering*. During the New York City Ballet's 1988 American Music Festival, she originated a principal role in Peter Martins' *Barber Violin Concerto*. She also originated principal roles in Martins' *Fearful Symmetries* in 1990 and *The Sleeping Beauty* (as Carabosse) in 1991.

Ashley danced throughout the world, including the major capitals of Western and Eastern Europe, and in China. In 1978, she danced at The White House for President and Mrs. Carter, and in 1986 she was chosen as the American ballerina to represent the United States at a gala celebrating the 40th Anniversary of UNESCO. The gala was held at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and televised throughout Europe and the USSR. Ashley's broadcast appearances included PBS' *Dance in America* series (which included Balanchine's *Ballo della Regina*, *Divertimento No. 15*, *Jewels* ("Emeralds"), and *The Four Temperaments*; and Bournonville's pas de deux from *Flower Festival at Genzano*) and the "Gala of Stars" in 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1985.

Ashley was a guest artist with many ballet companies, including the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet in London (dancing in *Paquita* and *The Sleeping Beauty*). She also led her own group, Merrill Ashley and Dancers, on tours in 1981 and 1982. Ashley's autobiography, *Dancing For Balanchine*, was published in 1984 by E.P. Dutton, Inc. In addition, Ashley is the co-author and co-artistic director of the video series *The Balanchine Essays*, produced by the George Balanchine Foundation. She was also the subject of the 2015 documentary *The Dance Goodbye*, which documented her career transition following her retirement from performance. In 1987, she was the recipient of the *Dance Magazine* Award.

Ashley has also conducted lectures for The George Balanchine Foundation at the Boston Ballet and Massachusetts Youth Ballet. She has staged *Ballo della Regina* for The George Balanchine Trust at Ballet Nacional de Cuba (2000), San Francisco Ballet, and Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and frequently teaches master classes at such companies as the Paris Opera Ballet and Royal Danish Ballet.

Scope and Content Note

The Merrill Ashley papers, dating from 1950 to 2017, document the career of the ballerina through ballet class and choreography notebooks; photographs; letters; diaries; book drafts and interview

transcripts for the book *Dancing For Balanchine*; calendars and datebooks; programs and clippings; posters; artifacts such as pointe shoes; and books.

The ballet notebooks were created by Ashley during classes she took with George Balanchine (1976-1978) and Stanley Williams (1990). Ashley also created notes for classes she taught herself, as well as for choreography she learned for works by Balanchine. These include *Chaconne*, *Firebird*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Union Jack*, and *Sylvia Pas de Deux*, among others.

The photographs contain rehearsal and performance shots of the New York City Ballet and Merrill Ashley and Dancers; special events such as Ashley's visit to The White House, the New York City Ballet's 50th anniversary, and receiving an honor from the New York State Legislature; advertisements featuring Ashley; and informal shots of Ashley. These include her during warmups and physical therapy; shooting *The Balanchine Essays*; with other dancers, friends, and fans; and teaching dancers and working with dance companies. Figures pictured with Ashley include George Balanchine, Ib Andersen, Beverly Sills, and President Carter, as well as dancers from the New York City Ballet, the Bolshoi Ballet, the Hong Kong Ballet, the Tokyo Ballet, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and Ballet Taos. Also present is a baby book kept by Ashley's parents, accompanied by a genealogy of her family.

The letters contain a set of correspondence between Ashley and her parents dating from 1964 to 1974; they discuss her training at the School of American Ballet and her early career at the New York City Ballet. The rest of the letters, dating primarily from 1984 onward, consist mainly of notes and cards from friends and fans, though more substantial letters are present in a few cases. Ashley arranged these letters chronologically and included lists of letters and their authors for each year; these lists are included in the folders. Writers include Jerome Robbins, Clement Crisp, Arlene Croce, Bill Whitehead (Ashley's editor at E.P. Dutton), Beverly Sills, and the dancers Peter Martins, Alicia Alonso, Valentina Kozlova, Jacques d'Amboise, Darla Hoover, Sara Mau, Ruthanna Boris, Nikolaj Hübbe, and Amanda Edge. Letters dating from 1993 mainly discuss an injury Ashley suffered in performance, while most 1997 letters pertain to her retirement.

Ashley kept consistent diaries for only short stretches of time. The earliest of these date from 1969 and 1972 (the latter documents a New York City Ballet visit to the Soviet Union). Some diaries from the mid-1970s are kept in datebooks. Diaries from 1992 to 1994 chart Ashley's recovery from a hip injury.

The files for *Dancing For Balanchine* document that book's creation through book proposals (written by Ashley's husband, Kibbe Fitzpatrick), transcripts of interviews with Ashley, manuscripts, galleys, proofs, photographs, clippings, and correspondence with editor Bill Whitehead of E.P. Dutton.

Five binders of scripts and notes document the video series *The Balanchine Essays*.

The programs and clippings comprise the largest portion of the collection. They cover Ashley's dancing and teaching activity, starting with her earliest performances in the late 1950s, and date up to 2017. Box 34, folder 3 contains a list of Ashley's activities outside of the New York City Ballet from 1999 to 2017. Some files also contain itineraries, photographs, or other memorabilia of Ashley's visits to other dance companies.

The posters advertise the New York City Ballet and Merrill Ashley and Dancers. The artifacts consist of pointe shoes, an original drawing of Ashley by Jane Rosenberg published in the book *Dance Me A Story*, cards distributed at Ashley's retirement gala, and a button with a photograph of Ashley. Two pairs of the pointe shoes date from the 1950s and were Ashley's earliest shoes, while the rest (five pairs and three single shoes, all autographed) are from the 1980s or 1990s.

The books consist of *Dancing For Balanchine*, *Balanchine's Ballerinas* by Robert Tracy, *Choura: The Memory of Alexandra Danilova* (a signed autobiography), and *Dance Me A Story* by Jane Rosenberg. The two books regarding Balanchine are inscribed by Ashley to her grandmother.

The collection also holds sound and video recordings. Among the sound recordings are classes led by George Balanchine and Stanley Williams; interviews with Ashley, including those carried out for the book *Dancing For Balanchine*; and lectures by Ashley on Balanchine. The videos includes performances by Ashley with the New York City Ballet, Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, and at the 1986 UNESCO gala; rehearsals with the New York City Ballet and the Cuban National Ballet; Ashley teaching the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company; interviews with Ashley; and video of the New York City Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre dating from the early 1970s (not featuring Ashley). Also present are home movies from Ashley's childhood.

Key Terms

Subjects

Ballet -- 20th century
Ballet companies
Ballet dancers
Choreography

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Ballet slippers
Clippings (information artifacts)
Diaries
Interviews
Letters (correspondence)
Notes (documents)
Photographs
Posters
Programs (documents)
Scrapbooks

Names

Ashley, Merrill
Balanchine, George
Williams, Stanley, 1925-1997
New York City Ballet
School of American Ballet

Container List

Notebooks 1976-1991

Ballet Classes

- b. 1 f. 1-5 **Ashley, Merrill** 1984, 1998-2008
Ashley taught the 1984 class (for the School of American Ballet) with Diana Adams.
- b. 1 f. 6 **Balanchine, George** 1976-1978
- b. 2 f. 1 **Williams, Stanley** 1990
These notes accompany a September 17th, 1990 recording of a Williams class. Inquiries regarding audio and moving image materials in the collection may be directed to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division (dance@nypl.org).
- b. 2 f. 2 **Choreography** 1991
Notes on *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*, *Chaconne*, *Firebird*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Union Jack*, *Sylvia Pas de Deux*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Raymonda Variations*, *Jewels*, and *Square Dance*.

Photographs 1950-2014

- b. 2 f. 3 **Baby Book and Family Genealogy** 1950-1989
- b. 2 f. 4 **Book Signing Party** 1984
- b. 2 f. 5 **Capezio Advertisement Shoot** circa 1980
- b. 2 f. 6 ***Glamour Magazine* Shoot** 1985
With husband Kibbe Fitzpatrick.
- b. 2 f. 7 **New York City Ballet 50th Anniversary** 1998
- b. 2 f. 8 **New York State Legislative Resolution** 1991
Also contains the New York State Senate proclamation.
- b. 5 f. 1 **Publicity** 1982

Rehearsals and Performances

- b. 2 f. 9 **1969**
- b. 2 f. 10 ***Apollo*** 1980
With Ib Andersen.
- b. 2 f. 11 **Merrill Ashley and Dancers** 1982 (All contact sheets.)
Ashley's own company, in Hawaii.
- b. 2 f. 12 **Sears Advertisement** 1970
- b. 2 f. 13 **The White House** 1978

Informal Photographs

- b. 2 f. 14 **1969-1980s**
Includes Ashley with George Balanchine and Beverly Sills.
- b. 2 f. 15 **1980s**
Photos of Ashley during warmups and physical therapy.
- b. 3 f. 1 **Early 1980s**
In Norway.
- b. 2 f. 16 **1986-1990**
With Peter Martins, Jacques Chirac, Adam Lüders, Ghislaine Thesmar, and Estelle Sommers.
- b. 2 f. 17-18 **1994-1996**
Includes shooting of *The Balanchine Essays*.
- b. 4 f. 1-5 **2001-2008**
Includes Ashley with the Hong Kong Ballet; with other dancers; and teaching in Taos, New Mexico.

Photographs (cont.)

Informal Photographs (cont.)

b. 4 f. 6-7 **2012-2014**

Includes Ashley teaching Svetlana Lunkina and Olga Smirnova at the Bolshoi Ballet; at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; and at the Tokyo Ballet.

Letters 1964-2017

Starting with 1984, each year has a listing of writers with their relationship to Ashley.

b. 4 f. 7-9 **1964-1974, 1979, 1984**

Folders dating from 1969 to 1974 hold letters to Ashley's parents. Folders dating from 1984 include letters from Jerome Robbins, Bill Whitehead of E.P. Dutton, and dancers from New York City Ballet.

b. 6 f. 1-8 **1984-1993**

Writers include Clement Crisp, Connie Chung, Bill Whitehead, Beverly Sills, Francis Patrelle, Mary Cover, dancers of the Royal Danish Ballet, Sadler's Wells Theatre, David Parsons, Peter Martins, Mary Tyler Moore, Adam Lüders, Valentina Kozlova, and Margaret Tracy. Letters and cards from 1993 pertain to Ashley's onstage injury.

b. 7 f. 1-8 **1993-2000**

Writers include Peter Martins, Jacques d'Amboise, Debbie Wingert, Baird Hastings, Darla Hoover, Ann McCoy, Sara Mau, Ruthanna Boris, Arlene Croce, Alicia Alonso, Nikolaj Hübbe, Peter Martins, and Amanda Edge. Notes and cards from 1997 mainly concern Ashley's retirement.

b. 8 f. 1-6 **2001-2012**

Writers include Clement Crisp, Colleen Neary of the Royal Danish Ballet, Lourdes Lopez, Lorena Jeijoo, Mikko Nissinen, Jennifer Ringer, Victoria Morgan, and Roy Kaiser.

b. 9 f. 1-3 **2013-2017**

Writers include dancers and coaches from the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, the American Ballet Theatre, the Bolshoi Ballet, the Houston Ballet, the Dresden Ballet, and the Miami City Ballet; and Eileen Douglas and Ron Steinman, directors of *The Dance Goodbye*.

Diaries

Diaries from 1992 to 1994 document Ashley's recovery from a hip injury. They contain medical and exercise notes.

b. 9 f. 4 **1969, 1972**

The 1972 diary documents a New York City Ballet tour of the Soviet Union.
Access restricted until the death of Merrill Ashley.

b. 9 f. 5-6 **1974-1975, 1978, 1992-1993**

b. 10 f. 1-2 **1993-1994**

Dancing For Balanchine

b. 10 f. 3-4 **Book Proposals 1983**

By Kibbe Fitzpatrick, prepared for editor Bill Whitehead at E.P. Dutton.

Interviews

Inquiries regarding audio materials in the collection may be directed to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division (dance@nypl.org). Audio materials will be subject to preservation assessment and migration prior to access.

b. 10 f. 5-8 **Transcripts 1983**

b. 11 f. 1-7 Transcribed from the sound recordings of Ashley interviewed by Larry Kaplan.

Manuscripts 1983 (All typescripts.)

b. 11 f. 8 **Original**

b. 12 f. 1-4

b. 12 f. 5 **Revisions**

b. 13 f. 1-6 With annotations and correspondence with E.P. Dutton.

b. 14 f. 1

b. 14 f. 2-4 **Proofs and Galley 1984**

Dancing For Balanchine (cont.)

- b. 14 f. 5-6 **Photographs 1983**
- b. 15 f. 1-4 Contains contact sheets and photos reproduced in the book, including sequences demonstrating choreography.
- b. 16 f. 1
- b. 5 f. 2
- b. 16 f. 2-3 **Publicity File and Clippings 1984-1985**
- b. 17 *The Balanchine Essays* 1986-1994
- b. 18
- b. 16 f. 4 **Calendars and Datebooks 1976, 1993-2003**
- b. 19 f. 1
- Programs and Clippings**
- b. 19 f. 2-7 **1950s-1973**
- b. 3 f. 2 **1960-1969 (Scrapbook.)**
Contains letters and telegrams as well as programs and clippings.
- b. 20 f. 1-7 **1974-1982**
- b. 21 **1977-1980 (Scrapbook.)**
- b. 22 f. 1-5 **1979-1983**
Files from 1981 to 1982 document tours by both New York City Ballet and Merrill Ashley and Dancers.
- b. 23 **1980-1981 (Scrapbook.)**
- b. 3 f. 3-4 **1980-1989**
- b. 24 **1981-1982 (Scrapbook.)**
- b. 25 f. 1-7 **1983-1985**
- b. 26 f. 1-6 **1985-1988**
- b. 27 f. 1-5 **1987-1990**
- b. 28 f. 1-6 **1989-1993**
- b. 29 f. 1-6 **1993-1997**
- b. 30 f. 1-5 **1997-1999**
Files dating from 1997 document Ashley's retirement.
- b. 31 f. 1-6 **1998-2002**
- b. 32 f. 1-5 **2002-2007**
- b. 33 f. 1-5 **2008-2012**
- b. 34 f. 1-3 **2013-2017**
Folder 3 contains a list of Ashley's activities outside of the New York City Ballet from 1999 to 2017.
- b. 35 f. 1 **Posters early 1980s**
For the New York City Ballet and Merrill Ashley and Dancers.

Artifacts

- b. 36 **Illustration 1984**
An original drawing of Ashley by Jane Rosenberg published in the book *Dance Me A Story*, for which Ashley also wrote the introduction.
See also the book in box 39.

Ballet Shoes

- b. 37 **1950s**
Two pairs of Ashley's earliest pointe shoes.
- b. 38 **1980s-1990s**
Five pairs of shoes and three single shoes, all autographed.

Artifacts (cont.)

b. 34 f. 4 **Souvenirs 1997**

Contains cards distributed at Ashley's retirement gala, and a button with a photo of Ashley.

b. 39 **Books 1983-1984**

Sound and Video Recordings 1970-2010

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