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

Conditions Governing Use: The author/creator retains copyright of materials. For information on obtaining permission to publish, contact the Dance Division at dance@nypl.org.


Processing note: Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2013

Related Materials:
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 (object genre)
Correspondence
Drawings (visual works)
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
**Container List**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 1</td>
<td>Biographical Information 1960s-1980s Correspondence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 2-3</td>
<td>General Correspondence 1940s-1980s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 4-8</td>
<td>Beland, Charles 1940s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 9</td>
<td>Gusten, Theodore J.H 1938-1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 10</td>
<td>Schindler, Ewald 1920s, 1940s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 11-13</td>
<td>(?) Ernst 1930s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 1 f. 14</td>
<td>Family Correspondence 1940-1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 1-2</td>
<td>European Tour--Correspondence, Notes and Itinerary 1953-1954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 3-5</td>
<td>European Tour Daybooks 1963-1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 6</td>
<td>Day Book 1944 Berlin, London and Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 7</td>
<td>Berlin, Correspondence, Notes, and Lectures 1928, 1930s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 8</td>
<td>Espenak School. Berlin 1930-1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 9</td>
<td>Espenek School. Berlin 1930-1934 Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 10</td>
<td>Chronik des ersten Schuljahres 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 2 f. 11</td>
<td>Journal About Dance Movements 1928-1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 1</td>
<td>Wigman, Mary 1920s, 1959 Letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 2-5</td>
<td>Mary Wigman’s School 1927-1932 Espenak’s notes and grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 6</td>
<td>Articles About Espenak in Berlin 1927-1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 7</td>
<td>Article About Gladys Espenak (sister)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 8</td>
<td>Dance Publications 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 9</td>
<td>Dance Program 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 10</td>
<td>Marriage Certificate and Deed 1931, 1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 11 f. 1</td>
<td>Broadside. Ein Sommernachstrum 1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 11-13</td>
<td>Mary Wigman’s Conference 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 14</td>
<td>London. Espenak’s Performances 1934-1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 11 f. 2</td>
<td>Diploma from the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 11 f. 3-4</td>
<td>Drawings of Espenak 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 14</td>
<td>European Contract and Performances 1926-1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3 f. 15-17</td>
<td>Roda Roda. Correspondence and Publications 1928-1941 New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 4 f. 1-2</td>
<td>Espenak School 1940s-1960s Advertisements and promotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 4 f. 3</td>
<td>Notes on Dance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Programs Choreographed by Espenak 1945-1960
Reviews of Espenak's Dance Improvisation Recitals 1955-1957
Dance Magazine 1943
Article—“Do It The Graceful Way”
Articles on Espenak and Dance 1940s-1980s
Printed Matter 1970s
Certificate on Naturalization 1948

Correspondence 1975
Exhibit Catalogs 1972-1981
Felix H. Man featured in der bild 1965
Philobiblon 1967
Man, Felix H. Hommage a Senefelder 1967
Article: Felix H. Man and Stefan Lorant 1971
Photograph Album 1931
Medallion 1976

Certificates Awarded to Espenak for Dance Therapy 1966-1980
Conferences and Workshops 1967-1988
Correspondence 1957-1988
Dance Therapy Research Information 1950s-1980s
Dance Therapy: Theory and Application 1981

Dance Therapy Workshops in Australia 1987-1988
Dance Therapy Workshops in Germany 1985-1988
Day Book 1977
International Symposium on Mental Retardation 1979
Lectures on Dance Therapy 1967-1971
Memorium for Espenak 1989
Plaque 1988
Proposed Tour for Psycho-Therapy with Body Mechanics 1963

Drafts 1981
Published Book 1981
Final Corrected Draft 1981
b. 10 f. 1-12  Man’s Walk or Walk