

**The New York Public Library**  
**New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center**  
**Jerome Robbins Dance Division**

Guide to the

## **Don Oscar Becque papers**

1920-1983

(S) \*MGZMD 268

Compiled by Maggie Long, Palmer School of Library and Information Science, class of 2011, and Laura Slezak Karas, August 2011

### **Summary**

**Creator:** Becque, Don Oscar

**Title:** Don Oscar Becque papers, 1920-1983

**Size:** 1.26 linear feet (3 boxes)

**Source:** Gift of Don Oscar Becque, February 1984, and Elaine Shipman, October 2005.

**Abstract:** This collection documents the professional life of Don Oscar Becque, a dancer, choreographer, director, and teacher of modern dance. Drafts and extensive notes for book projects, essays, course development and individual lessons regarding his work in the field of dance, body mechanics, and movement theory make up the bulk of the collection. The collection also includes Becque's research materials, consisting of annotated press clippings and notes; correspondence; publicity materials; résumés; photographs; and a small amount of personal material.

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

**Copyright information:** Copyright retained by any document's creator.

**Preferred citation:** Don Oscar Becque papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

### **Processing note**

Prior to processing, the collection consisted of folders and loose materials. Existing folders remain intact and folder titles have been retained. Materials not in folders have been grouped by document type and folder titles have been taken from the documents.

### **Related collections**

American Ballet Theatre records. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Charles Boultenhouse and Parker Tyler papers. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

Federal Theatre Project collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

Grant Hyde Code papers. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Mary Fanton Roberts papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Ted Shawn collection. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

## Creator history

Don Oscar Becque, also known as William Oscar Beck, was a dancer, choreographer, director, and teacher of modern dance. According to Becque's résumé, he studied at the American Laboratory Theatre School under Boleslavsky and Oupenskaya; studied musical composition under Frederick Schlieder; ballet under Mordkin, Vestoff, Fokine, and Cecchetti; American dance under Denishawn; and Japanese dance under Michio Ito. However, his most influential teacher was Mabel Elsworth Todd, the founder of Ideokinesis and the author of *The Thinking Body*. Becque was a dance student and then a research assistant for Todd for approximately fifteen years. Ideokinesis, an approach to body mechanics, was influential to the pioneers of modern dance, whom Becque counted himself among. Regardless, Todd's work developed Becque's interest in the study of body mechanics, which greatly informed his teaching.

Becque's career-long interest in dance education began in 1928 with the opening of the Becque School of the Dance. According to his résumé, he taught the first modern dance courses at New York University. After the peak of his dance career, he taught dance, body mechanics and movement theory, primarily in New York and Texas. In New York City, he founded the Body and Movement Arts Institute in the 1970s, where he taught the Becque approach to body and movement. As a flier states, "Movement skills and techniques are developed as an organic unit through the three synergies of energy release (STRUCTURAL action, GESTURAL action, SHAPING action) for both expressive and functional movement." This was the basis for *BODY ALIVE!*, a proposed book about the Becque system of synergy release, and the title of his workshops.

In addition to dance education, over the years Becque was involved with various youth organizations promoting the arts. In association with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, the Teens-In-Action Theatre Project acted to build self-esteem for high school dropouts by dramatizing ideas and problems, in which Becque acted as Executive Director, coordinator, and producer in 1967. Later, Becque and his wife, Elizabeth, founded the Dance Education Center, a non-profit organization that sought to provide creative outlets for underprivileged and low-income group children and young adults. In the early 1980s, Becque participated in a public works program for the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City via the Group for the Authentic Gesture, a non-profit organization formed in 1978.

Although Becque's most lasting legacy may be his educational career, he is also notable for his participation in the Federal Dance Theatre. A program of the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Dance Theatre grew out of the Federal Theatre Project and employed out-of-work professional dancers, choreographers, and stage personnel to bring dance to new audiences. Appointed the first national administrator of the Federal Dance Theatre, Becque's tenure was plagued by problems. Although his affiliation with the Federal Theatre Project lasted from 1935-1937, in 1936 alone Becque was appointed director of the Federal Dance Theatre, choreographed *The Young Tramps*, an original production, and resigned as director by the year's end.

### **Scope and content note**

This collection documents the professional life of Don Oscar Becque, with an emphasis on his teaching career. The majority of the collection consists of Becque's writings, which include drafts and extensive notes for book projects, essays, course development and individual lessons relating to his work in body mechanics. Two folders contain press clippings of his published articles, "The Dance" and "Growth Through the Ages." The remaining writings are early drafts and notes whose original folder titles have been retained; when necessary, folder titles have been supplied using the draft titles.

Becque's research materials consist of annotated press clippings and notes grouped topically. For example, the folder titled "Laban, Rudolf, and Juana de Laban" consists of various articles by and about the Labans, as well as Becque's notes. The collection also contains correspondence, primarily regarding interviews from the 1980s and letters of commendation; publicity materials; résumés; photographs; and a small amount of personal material.

Additional photographs, press clippings, and an interview with Becque can be found by conducting a subject search for "Becque, Don Oscar" in the catalog ([www.nypl.org/catalog](http://www.nypl.org/catalog)).

### **Arrangement**

Alphabetical by subject.

### **Key terms**

#### **Subjects**

Dance -- Study and teaching  
Dance -- United States  
Human mechanics  
Modern dance -- United States

#### **Names**

Becque, Don Oscar  
Federal Theatre Project (U.S.)

#### **Special formats**

Photographs

## Container list

- b.1 f.1 Body and Movement Arts Institute, 1971-1972, undated
- b.1 f.2 Correspondence, 1957-1982
- b.1 f.3 Correspondence--Letters of Commendation, 1968-1974
- b.1 f.4 Dance Education, 1957-1971
- b.1 f.5 Diagram of Tensegrity Structure, undated
- b.1 f.6 Personal Miscellaneous, 1920-1982
- b.1 f.7 Photographs, undated
- b.1 f.8 Programs and Press Clippings--Former Students, 1978-1980, undated
- b.1 f.9 Public Works Program, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, 1982-1983, undated
- b.1 f.10 Publicity Materials, 1930, 1965, undated
- Research Materials
- b.1 f.11-12 General, 1939-1969, undated
- b.2 f.1 An Approach Through Brain-Mind Modeling, undated
- b.2 f.2 Effort/Shape, 1965, undated
- b.2 f.3 Health Care Service, 1970s
- b.2 f.4 Laban, Rudolf, and Juana de Laban, 1954-1956, undated
- b.2 f.5 Lessac, Arthur, 1969-1974, undated
- b.2 f.6 Rolf, Ida P., 1960s
- b.2 f.7 Résumés, undated
- b.2 f.8 Workshop Promotional Materials, 1971
- Writings
- b.2 f.9 The Ah-Ha of Every Man, undated
- b.2 f.10 Authentic Gesture, undated
- b.2 f.11-12 Authentic Gesture--Reference and Consultations, undated
- b.3 f.1 Aware of Parts of Which We Are Not Conscious, undated
- b.3 f.2 Basic Efforts, undated
- b.3 f.3 Beauty on the Back Street, 1978, undated
- b.3 f.4 Book and Improvisation Notes, undated
- b.3 f.5 Book I--Units for Lines of Action, undated
- b.3 f.6 Book II--Lessons One-Fifteen and Summary, undated
- b.3 f.7 The Dance, 1937 June
- b.3 f.8 Flight of the Hawk, undated
- b.3 f.9 Growth Through the Ages, 1945
- b.3 f.10 Improvisation--Notes and Course Outline, undated
- b.3 f.11-14 Notes, undated
- b.3 f.15 The Pelvic Clock, undated
- b.3 f.16 Posture and Movement, undated
- b.3 f.17 Preface, undated
- b.3 f.18 Right/Left Brains, undated
- b.3 f.19 Space Patterns-Efforts-Actions, undated