



The New York Public Library  
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

**Helen Tamiris collection**

ca. 1939-1966

(S) \*MGZMC-Res. 24

Processed by Andrew Mark Wentinck.

## Summary

**Creator:** Tamiris, Helen, 1905-1966

**Title:** Helen Tamiris collection

**Date:** ca. 1939-1966

**Size:** 222 folders ca. 1000 items

**Source:** Gift. Bequest of Helen Tamiris. Received: November 1966 from Margarita Gibbons.

**Abstract:** The Helen Tamiris Collection comprises holographs, typescripts, and memorabilia, which mostly reflect Tamiris' choreographic work in the musical comedy and concert dance fields. The career of her husband, Daniel Nagrin, and the development of their company, the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company, are also represented.

### Conditions Governing Access:

FOLDER 31 REQUIRES THE PERMISSION OF DANIEL NAGRIN.

**Preferred citation:** Tamiris, Helen, 1905-1966. Helen Tamiris Collection, (S) \*MGZMC-Res. 24, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

**Language of the Material:** English

**Processing note:** Processed by Andrew Mark Wentinck.

## Creator History

(written by Walter Terry)

Helen Tamiris, one of the major pioneers in the development of modern dance in America and one of Broadway's best known choreographers, was born Helen Becker in 1905 in New York City's Lower East Side. The urge to dance was there from the start, but because her immigrant parents, who had escaped the ghettos of Europe, were very poor, little Helen had no dance lessons and no place to

dance. So she danced in the streets of her neighborhood. One of her brothers saw her dancing happily in the gutter and urged their father to try to give her dancing lessons. So at eight, she was enrolled in Irene Lewisohn's dance classes at the Henry Street Settlement.

Her father hoped that she would outgrow her obsession for dancing. She never did. Although her training with Miss Lewisohn was in free dance forms and not in ballet, she tried out for the Metropolitan Opera and won an audition which provided her with twelve dollars a week and free lessons. She stayed with the Met for four seasons and toured South America as second ballerina with the Bracale Opera Company.

But she was not happy with the limitations of opera ballet and extended her studies to include lessons with the great Michel Fokine. This introduced her to a broader concept of ballet, but it was still not enough, for the young dancer felt that ballet imported from abroad could not speak for America in American terms.

In order to do what she felt she must, she played a nightclub stint in Chicago as a specialty dancer and scored in a Chinese dance in "The Music Box Revue." With the money saved from these commercial engagements, she was able to prepare for her historic debut as a concert artist in a program of her own choreography and representing her own, personally developed, dance technique.

Dance Moods, which she called her debut program at New York's Little Theater on October 9, 1927, was a success, and a major new career was launched. Before this, Helen Becker had changed her name to Tamiris (she dropped the "Helen" until she returned to Broadway as a musical comedy choreographer in 1943). She had selected the new name from the first line of a poem concerning a Persian queen: "Thou art Tamiris, the ruthless queen who banishes all obstacles."

In the years that followed, Tamiris encountered many obstacles (a good many of them financial), and she banished most of them. The success of her first all-American program, in which she had sought to capture the movement idioms of the American Negro, the prize fighter, and the citizen of America's jazz age, attracted interest abroad. In 1928, at the invitation of the Mozarteum Society, she danced in Salzburg—the first American dancer ever to appear there under such high auspices. Her jazz compositions, spirituals, and athletic studies (including experiments with nude dancing) were enthusiastically received in Paris and in Berlin.

But she wanted to return home to forward the cause of modern dance and to forward, in her indomitable, militant fashion, her own career. In 1930, she helped organize the Dance Repertory Theater (she became its first president), which, for two years, presented repertory seasons featuring the works of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Tamiris—the four chief founders of modern dance in America (Hanya Holm, coming from a modern dance background in Germany, became the fifth founding modern dance pioneer in this country).

Tamiris also headed the dance wing of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theater Project, and it was at this time that she turned more and more to dances of protests, to themes of social comment, to mirroring in choreography the bitter fruits of the depression. In the 1930s she created "Cycle of Unrest," composed of Protest Camaraderie, Conflict, the Individual and the Masses; "Momentum" (also a dance of protest); "How Long Brethren," based on the inequities suffered by the American Negro (this was one of her most famous creations), and "Adelante," a protest against the cruelties of the Spanish Civil War. She did, of course, create dances of other cast, among them, her enormously powerful and poetic "Walt Whitman Suite" and in 1941 her jubilant "Liberty Song," based upon songs of the American Revolution.

But whatever her theme, she went at it with gusto. She was tall for a dancer, strong of limb, and with a beautifully proportioned body topped by a mop of bright red hair. Probably no American dancer had stage impact to the same degree as did Tamiris. One critic wrote of her, “an emotional dancer, a stylist and a dynamo of energy and blunt force, fearless, direct and propulsive,” yet it was said of her Spirituals, “not translation but illumination.”

The force and fearlessness were always present. During the depression years, she made no secret of her leftist leanings, but she was equally energetic in issuing manifestoes on esthetics, debating theatrical issues, and, in recent seasons, letting the avant-garde in dance have it square between the eyes. As one avant-garde choreographer put it: “You can’t beat Helen because you know that if she suddenly took your side of the debate, she’d win that too.”

After “Liberty Song” and the eventual dissolving of her concert group because of lack of funds, Tamiris returned to Broadway, this time as choreographer for “Up in Central Park” (1943). In the ensuing years, she chalked up successes as choreographer for a revival of “Showboat,” “Annie Get Your Gun,” “Inside U.S.A.,” “Plain and Fancy” (1955), and many others.

In 1960 she returned to her first love, the field of concert dance, and with her husband of many years and her longtime dance partner, Daniel Nagrin, the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company was brought into being. Tamiris did not dance with this troupe—she had retired from the stage in the 1940s—but she choreographed for it, as did Mr. Nagrin, who was its performing star. The company was disbanded in 1965 when Tamiris and her husband separated as husband and wife.

Even at sixty, Helen Tamiris was a striking woman with a beautiful figure, a youthful face, an infectious laugh and a presence which exuded the energy and the spirit and the undiminished fire of one “who banishes all obstacles.”

## Scope and Content Note

The Helen Tamiris Collection comprises holographs, typescripts, and memorabilia, which mostly reflect Tamiris' choreographic work in the musical comedy and concert dance fields. The career of her husband, Daniel Nagrin, and the development of their company, the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company, are also represented.

**Arrangement:** The collection is organized in ten series. I. CORRESPONDENCE II. MUSICAL SHOWS III. CONCERT DANCES IV. DANCES (Miscellaneous) V. NOTEBOOKS VI. RECORDS VII. TYPESCRIPTS VIII. SUMMER WORKSHOPS IX. MANUSCRIPTS X. MISCELLANEOUS

## Key Terms

### Subjects

Manuscripts -- Collections

### Names

Tamiris, Helen, 1905-1966

Nagrin, Daniel

Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company

## Container List

### I. Correspondence

Fifty-four folders make up the "Correspondence Series," the majority of which is letters written to Helen Tamiris.

#### HT/Misc

- f. 1 De la Tour, Evelyn 1961 (2 Items)
- f. 2 Frosch, Aaron R. n.d. (1 Item)
- f. 3 Gibbons, Margarita 1966 (4 Items)
- f. 4 Harris, Bettina 1960s (4 Items)
- f. 5 Lowry, W. McNeil 1963 (2 Items)
- f. 6 Nagrin, Daniel ca. 1964 (2 Items)
- f. 7 Terry, Walter 1964 (1 Item)
- f. 8 Misc. 1939, 1960s (5 Items)

#### Misc/HT

- f. 9 Anderson, Murray n.d. (1 Item)
- f. 10 Becker, Bruce & response 1962 (2 Items)
- f. 11 Blake, William D. 1964 (1 Item)
- f. 12 C. W. Post College 1965 (1 Item)
- f. 13 Conference Board of the Associated Research Council. Committee on International Exchange of Persons 1965 (3 Items)
- f. 14 De la Tour, Evelyn 1960 (2 Items)
- f. 15 Dietz, Howard 1948 (1 Item)
- f. 16 "Paul" (re "Ali Baba" & "Le médecin malgré lui") 1950 (1 Item)
- f. 17 East Carolina College & response 1964 (2 Items)
- f. 18 Frankel, Emily & Mark Ryder 1954 (1 Item)
- f. 19 Gibbons, Margarita n.d. (1 Item)
- f. 20 Hill, Martha 1958 (1 Item)
- f. 21 Hodes, Stuart & response 1965 (2 Items)
- f. 22 Hughes, Allen & response 1964 (2 Items)
- f. 23 Indiana University 1965 (5 Items)
- f. 24 Karas, Sylvia 1965 (1 Item)
- f. 25 Katz 1966 (1 Item)
- f. 25 Lennon, Florence Becker 1965 (1 Item)
- f. 26 Limón, José 1964 (1 Item)
- f. 27 Magriel, Paul n.d. (1 Item)
- f. 28 Martin, John 1965 (3 Items)
- f. 29 Marymount College 1965 (2 Items)
- f. 30 Maynard, Olga 1965 (1 Item)
- f. 31 Nagrin, Daniel 1943-1965 (7 Items)  
Restricted: Requires permission of Daniel Nagrin.
- f. 32 New York State Council on the Arts 1964-1965 (5 Items)

I. Correspondence (cont.)

Misc/HT (cont.)

- f. 33 Schick, Eleanor 1960 (1 Item)
- f. 34 Schlottman, Jeanette 1963 (1 Item)
- f. 35 Scott, Marion 1963-1965 (6 Items)
- f. 36 Sorell, Walter 1948 (1 Item)
- f. 37 Venable, Lucy 1964 (1 Item)
- f. 38 Weissberger, Arnold 1950, 1965 (2 Items)
- f. 39 Yocum, Rachael Dunaven 1965 (1 Item)
- f. 40-41 Get well wishes to HT 1966 (19 Items)
- f. 42 Business 1936 (1 Item)
- f. 43-43A Misc/HT (20 Items)
- f. 44 Telegrams re "By the Sea," 1954 (20 Items)
- f. 45 Telegrams re "Plain and Fancy," 1955 (4 Items)
- f. 46 Telegrams re Italian Musical 1953 (5 Items)
- f. 47 Copy of letter re American Dance Theatre 1964 (1 Item)
- f. 48 Misc/Daniel Nagrin (8 Items)
- f. 49 Daniel Nagrin/Margarita Gibbons 1966 (3 Items)
- f. 50 Weissberger & Frosch/Margarita Gibbons 1966 (4 Items)
- re Tamiris estate
- f. 51 Misc/Margarita Gibbons (4 Items)
- f. 52 Miscellaneous (2 Items)

II. Musical Shows

The series "Musical Shows" represents fifty-four folders of production notes and scripts for some of Tamiris' efforts in musical comedy.

- f. 53-54 "Annie Get Your Gun"
- f. 55-56 "Camelot" & "My Fair Lady"
- f. 57-60 "Eastchester Green"
- f. 61-64 "Great to be Alive"
- f. 65-70 "Inside U.S.A."
- f. 71 "It's Up to You"
- f. 72-74 "Mr. Dynamite"
- f. 75-80 "Of Thee I Sing"
- f. 81-83 "Park Avenue"
- f. 84-87 "Plain and Fancy"
- f. 88 "Promised Valley"
- f. 89-91 "Trojan Incident"
- f. 92-94 "Up in Central Park"
- f. 95 "Great Dane a Comin' " from "Touch and Go"
- f. 96 "The Immortal Puppet"
- f. 97 "The Lady from Colorado"
- f. 98-102 "Sugar Loaf Hill"
- f. 103 Miscellaneous lyrics

II. Musical Shows (cont.)

- f. 104 "Start the Day Dancing" (TV script)
- f. 105 Radio Text
- f. 106 "Ali Baba" (TV script?)

III. Concert Dances

The next series, "Concert Dances," contains twenty-six folders of similar material with regard to her concert dances.

- f. 107 "Adelante" 1939
- f. 108-110 "Arrows of Desire" 1963
- f. 111 International House performance July 29, 1939
- f. 112 "Liberty Song"
- f. 113-114 "Memoir" 1960
- f. 115-118 "Rituals" 1963
- f. 119 Spirituals, Negro
- f. 120 "Versus" 1964
- f. 121 "The Vine or the Tree" 1958
- f. 122-129 "Walt Whitman Suite" 1958-1964
- f. 130 "Women's Song"
- f. 131 "The Long Night"
- f. 132 "A Modern Fairy Tale"

IV. Dances (Miscellaneous)

Notes for additional dances appear in the seventeen folders of the series labeled "Dance (Miscellaneous)."

- f. 133 "Men's Serfdom"
- f. 134 "Once Upon a Time"
- f. 135 "Small Town Circus"
- f. 136 "Swing Ballet"
- f. 137 "Take it in your Stride"
- f. 138 Composition course
- f. 139 Dance for three
- f. 140 Lecture demonstrations
- f. 141 Lincoln Center dance
- f. 142 Music possibilities
- f. 143 Schedules
- f. 144 Thoughts for dances
- f. 145-148A Notes

V. Notebooks

Eight folders of notebooks complete the material relating to Tamiris' choreography.

- f. 149 "Frankie and Johnny" & "Chrysalis" 1957
- f. 150 Composition notes
- f. 151 Actors' class 1957
- f. 152 "Memoir" Connecticut version 1959) -
- f. 153 "Once upon a Time" 1961

V. Notebooks (cont.)

- f. 154 "Women's Song" & "Memoir" N.Y. version 1960) -
- f. 155 Promptbook 1961
- f. 156 Chronology 1927-1934

VI. Records 1946-1966

"Records, 1946-1966" contains twenty-six folders of business material and some personal documents such as Tamiris' marriage certificate and her will.

- f. 157-159 Appointment books 1958-1965
- f. 160 Budget record 1956-1966
- f. 161 Marriage certificate 1946
- f. 162 Will 1965
- f. 163 Nagrin desertion 1964
- f. 164 Columbia Lecture Bureau
- f. 165 Taxes
- f. 166 Bank receipts
- f. 167 Hospital bills
- f. 168 Contracts and agreements
- f. 169 Insurance
- f. 170 Concert expenses
- f. 171-180 Westport house
- f. 181-182 Miscellaneous

VII. Typescripts

The series "Typescripts" (eight folders) refers to conferences attended, speeches given, and reports made by Helen Tamiris.

- f. 183 "Acting as a Business: The Body" (Helen Tamiris - guest speaker)
- f. 184-186 "Conference on Creative use of Minorities in Theatre"  
(includes remarks by Helen Tamiris)
- f. 187 Lawrence, Peter. "Final Report to the Board of of Directors on New Dance Group Presentations"
- f. 188-189 "Proposed Plan for the Modern Dance"
- f. 190 "Minutes of Round Table #21," a meeting of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers (Helen Tamiris in attendance)

VIII. Summer Workshops

Nine folders of information related to the 1960 and 1961 summer workshops offered by Tamiris comprise the next series.

- f. 191 Notes 1960-1961
- f. 192 Correspondence 1961
- f. 193 Applications 1961
- f. 194 Daily Schedules 1961
- f. 195 Notes
- f. 196 Travel directions, applications, schedules, etc.
- f. 197 Central City Opera House Association
- f. 198-199 Miscellaneous

## IX. Manuscripts

The eight folders of "Manuscripts by Helen Tamiris" contain additional writings by Tamiris. One item in the series is a poem entitled "Love is Dead" and written just after Daniel Nagrin left her.

- f. 200-202 Biographical material
- f. 203 Recommendation for Marion Scott for Doris Humphrey Fellowship 1963
- f. 204 Helen Tamiris Award 1964
- f. 205 "Dance on Film"
- f. 206 *"Present Problems and Possibilities" (article for Walter Sorell's The Dance has Many Faces)*
- f. 207 Poem - "Love is Dead" dated 1965 Jan. 17

## X. Miscellaneous

The final series is fourteen folders of miscellany. Included are the registers from Tamiris' funeral and many citations awarded to her.

- f. 208 Registers from Helen Tamiris' funeral
- f. 209 Tributes to Helen Tamiris at her funeral
- f. 210-211 Condolences on Helen Tamiris' death
- f. 212 Helen Tamiris tribute by Howard Bay
- f. 213 Citation from the School of Drama of Yale University 1965
- f. 214 Citation from the Westchester County Dance Festival 1961
- f. 215 Citation of appreciation 1958
- f. 216 Birthday citation 1964
- f. 217 Citation from the International Festival of Dance 1957
- f. 218 Citation from the Women's Division of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies 1958
- f. 219 Press releases
- f. 220-221 Sketches