



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Asadata Dafora papers

1933-1963

Sc MG 48

Processed by William Kline.

Summary

Creator: Dafora, Asadata, 1890-1965

Title: Asadata Dafora papers

Date: 1933-1963

Source: Presented by Benjamin Richardson Allen, September 1969. SCM77-35

Abstract: Correspondence mainly addressed to Dafora from friends, business associates, and promotional agents; some express his continued association with Sierra Leone. Also, personal papers, autobiographical sketch written in 1960, agreements, contracts, drafts of plays and performances, sheet music, programs, announcements with promotional releases, and news clippings relating to Dafora's career and to African dance forms he used in his performances and to African culture in general. Correspondents include Orson Welles, discussing a plan to film Joseph Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS.

Preferred citation: Asadata Dafora papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by William Kline; machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Separated Materials:

The following items were removed from the: *Asadata Dafora (Horton) Papers* Accession Number SCM77-35 and have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

General Research and Reference Division: (Books, pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, government publications)

Aurora, poems by Anne K. Hall, 1948

91 clippings on African to Vertical File

span class="emph">Art & Artifacts Division/span>

1 costume with shoes

span class="emph">Photographs and Prints Division/span>

49 photographs

span class="emph">Other/span>

6 pieces to Sheet Music Collection

10 programs to the Program Collection

36 programs to the Dance Collection, PARC

Creator History

Asadata Dafora (Horton)'s career as a dancer, choreographer, director and writer spanned the decades from 1930 to 1960. His significance in the history of modern dance is based largely on his creation and development of the "dance-drama" as an art form. The African dance troupe he established, the Shogolo Oloba, proved to unsophisticated American audiences that African dance was not only an exotic blend of magic, color and rhythm, but that it was also an undiscovered resource for complex dance techniques which demanded recognition and study.

The Dafora family history and the formation of the family name provide a rich foundation for the making of an artist. Asadata Dafora was born in 1890 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, British West Africa, to a family prominent in the arts and in government. His mother, an accomplished pianist, studied in Vienna and Paris. A great uncle, knighted by Queen Victoria, was the first black mayor in Sierra Leone. Asadata Dafora's great great grandfather was a slave in Nova Scotia who assumed the name of his master. When he was released, he returned to Sierra Leone and continued the European name. However, in most instances, Asadata is identified with the African rather than the European surname.

The Dafora-Horton name and the amalgam of the African-European influences added depth to his education and shaped his art. As a child, Dafora often ran away from home in order to observe the native dancing during African festivals. This interest in the dance and folk traditions initiated a life-long study of African culture, traditions and language. He knew English and seventeen distinct African dialects. In contrast to his knowledge of African life, he learned European history and culture by attending the Wesleyan School in Sierra Leone, and later by studying in Italy at the Milan and La Scala opera houses from 1910 and 1912. As a result of his operatic training and his singing debut in Sierra Leone, he toured England, France and Germany in "L'Africaine" and "Aida," circa 1912. During this tour, he added French, German and Italian to his list of languages.

The European tour affected the direction of his life and career. While in a German nightclub one evening in 1910, he happened to hear the orchestra play a medley of African songs. Overwhelmed with emotion at the sound of his native music, he spontaneously began to dance. The audience, never having witnessed true African dancing, was fascinated and wildly enthusiastic at the performance. Consequently, the management asked that he remain there to assist in the training of a group of dancers to celebrate the opening of the Kiel Canal.

On this tour, Dafora had been amazed by the narrow and simplistic view of Africa held by most Europeans. The obligation to educate people about Africa gave him the impetus to abandon his singing career. Instead, he chose to pursue dancing in order to entertain audiences while educating them about his native continent.

When he first arrived in Harlem in 1929, he supported himself by singing while devoting his free time to the creation of authentic African dances. Four years after his arrival, he finished his first dance-drama, entitled "Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman," which he wrote, choreographed and directed. He aimed for authenticity by selecting dancers native to Africa and instructing them in African dialects as part of their training. His childhood memories of the native dances were incorporated with detailed accuracy into performances which further refined the purity of the dance.

Dafora had difficulty in financing his first show because his dancing and his ideas about art were alien to American audiences. Harlem impresarios refused him funding on the grounds that his show was "highbrow." However, a little theater on Twenty-third Street took a chance on it, and the play opened May 6, 1934. The critics praised the play and the audiences flooded into the small theater. The play's popularity forced it to move to the larger Chanin Theater on Broadway where it became the season's box office hit. With the success of the play Dafora had accomplished his primary objective: he introduced people to Africa through the beauty, the energy and the grace of African dancing.

His career now established, Dafora and his dancers continued their work with a second play, "Zunguru," which opened March 23, 1940, followed by "Batanga" on November 2, 1941. In addition to numerous engagements in the New York City area, he and his group toured the United States, performing at civic clubs, black colleges and in cities in the Midwest and South. After the tours, Dafora founded the Academy of Jazz with Mura Dehn (circa 1950), and was the subject of a film by Kinsley Mbadiwe called "The Greater Tomorrow." In 1960, nearly thirty years after his arrival in the United States, he returned to Sierra Leone to become the Cultural Director when the country received its independence.

Illness caused him to return to New York City for treatment. He died in Harlem Hospital on March 4, 1965. He was survived by his wife, the former Rosalia Thyfer.

Scope and Content Note

The Asadata Dafora (Horton) Papers, 1933-1963 reflect his active and successful career and provide insight into the significance of his art. The papers are divided into seven files: Personal Papers; Correspondence; Agreements and Contracts; Typescripts; Sheet Music; Programs; and Newspaper Clippings. The collection mirrors a continuing interest in Africana that extended beyond the scope of his career.

Key Terms

Geographic Names

Africa -- Social life and customs

Sierra Leone -- Social life and customs

Subjects

African American dancers

African Americans in the performing arts
American drama -- African American authors
Dance -- Africa
Dance -- United States

Occupations

Choreographers
Dancers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Sheet music

Names

Dafora, Asadata, 1890-1965
Conrad, Joseph, 1857-1924
Dafora, Asadata, d1890-1965
Welles, Orson, 1915-1985

Container List

b. 1 f. 1 **Personal Papers 1950-1961**

The file consists of a manuscript autobiographical sketch written after he returned to Sierra Leone (1960), printed and typescript promotional releases for a performance at Jacob's Pillow, a Certificate of Appreciation from the African Academy of Arts and Research and a list of members of his dance company.

b. 1 f. 2 **Correspondence 1933-1963**

The file contains letters addressed to Dafora from friends, business associates and promotional agents. Of particular note are letters from Orson Welles, concerning a plan to film "*Heart of Darkness*," and Eleanor Roosevelt, commenting on a performance of the Grand African Dance Festival. The outgoing letters concern Dafora's arrangements for rehearsal space and personal matters to friends in Sierra Leone. A small number of third-party letters are filed in chronological order with the incoming correspondence. The letters provide background for the various performances and tours and show his popularity with diverse audiences.

b. 1 f. 3 **Agreements and Contracts 1939-1965**

The folder of AGREEMENTS AND CONTRACTS, 1939-1956, documents his involvement with the National Concert and Artists Corporation and his itinerary with them, his contracts with Coronet Attractions and the African Academy of Arts and Research, along with some ephemera.

b. 1 f. 4 **Typescripts 1944, n.d.**

The file is comprised of complete and incomplete drafts of plays and performances. Mimeographed copies have been included with the typescripts, which are largely undated.

b. 1 f. 5 **Sheet Music**

The folder contains printed scores as well as three manuscript compositions entitled "*Awo-Wo*," "*Shar-Shar-Kolo*," (two versions), and "*Gui Fo*."

b. 1 f. 6 **Programs 1931-1959**

The file traces Dafora's career as dancer and artist. In addition to programs, the folders contain announcements and promotional releases which provide additional biographical information. It is interesting to note that in his performance at Mother A.M.E. Zion Church, on January 26, 1931, he was featured as a "lyric tenor from Sierra Leone." This is the only document that refers to his early singing career after his arrival in Harlem. Dated items are filed chronologically. Considerable undated material, arranged by title of performance, follows the chronological sequence.

b. 1 f. 7 **Programs n.d.**

b. 1 f. 8 **Newspaper Clippings 1934-1962**

The file consists mostly of reviews of Dafora's performances providing both critical and interpretive information. The clippings are filed in chronological order with undated clippings at the end of the folder. All the clippings have been photoduplicated.