

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Donald McKayle

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McKayle, Donald, 1930-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle,
Dates:	December 17, 2013 and July 28, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2013 and 2014
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:54:14).
Abstract:	Choreographer and educator Donald McKayle (1930 - 2018) was the author of <i>Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life</i> . His major choreographic works include <i>Games</i> , <i>Rainbow Round My Shoulder</i> , <i>District Storyville</i> , <i>Raisin</i> , and <i>Sophisticated Ladies</i> . McKayle was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 17, 2013 and July 28, 2014, in Irvine, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_342
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Choreographer and educator Donald McKayle was born on July 6, 1930 in New York City, New York to Eva Wilhelmina Cohen McKayle and Philip Augustus McKayle. Inspired by a Pearl Primus performance, he began dancing his senior year in high school, and won a scholarship to the New Dance Group in 1947.

In 1948, McKayle choreographed his first piece of work with the New Dance Group, and premiered his solo piece, *Saturday's Child*. From 1951 to 1969, McKayle founded and directed his own dance company, Donald McKayle and Company, which premiered his first major work entitled *Games* in 1951. McKayle then went on to choreograph masterworks *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, *District Storyville* and *Songs of the Disinherited*. *Golden Boy* (1964) was his first Broadway production, followed by *I'm Solomon* (1969) and *Dr. Jazz* (1975). McKayle directed and choreographed *Raisin* (1974), which was awarded a Tony for best musical. He was responsible for the entire concept, staging and choreography of the award-winning *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981). McKayle has also choreographed for films, including *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1970), *The Great White Hope* (1972), and *The Minstrel Man* (1976). McKayle has also choreographed stage acts for singers such as Harry Belafonte and Rita Moreno. In 2001, he choreographed the monumental ten-hour production of *Tantalus*.

The repositories for McKayle's work include the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the Cleveland San Jose Ballet, and the Los Angeles Contemporary Dance Theatre. He served as head of the Inner City Repertory Dance Company from 1970 to 1974, and then as choreographer for the Limon Dance Company since 1995. In all, McKayle choreographed over ninety performances for dance companies in the U.S., Canada, Israel, Europe and South America. He has taught at Bennington College, the Juilliard School, the American Dance Festival, and in Europe. McKayle served as dean of the School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts, and as professor of dance and the artistic director for the University of California, Irvine Dance.

McKayle has received numerous honors and awards, including an Outer Critics Circle Award, a NAACP Image Award, the Capezio Award, the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award, the American Dance Guild Award, a Living Legend Award from the National Black Arts Festival, two Choreographer's Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Dance/USA Honors, the Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Award, the Annual Award from the Dance Masters of America, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Dance Under the Stars Choreography Festival, the Black College Dance Exchange Honors, the Dance Magazine Award, and the American Dance Legacy Institute's Distinguished and Innovative Leadership Award, among others. In 2005, McKayle was honored at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and presented with a medal as a Master of African American Choreography. He has been named by the Dance Heritage Coalition as "one of America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: the first 100."

McKayle is the author of the 2002 autobiography, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*.

McKayle passed away on April 6, 2018.

Donald McKayle was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 17, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Donald McKayle was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 17, 2013 and July 28, 2014, in Irvine, California, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Choreographer and educator Donald McKayle (1930 - 2018) was the author of *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*. His major choreographic works include *Games*, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, *District Storyville*, *Raisin*, and *Sophisticated Ladies*.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

McKayle, Donald, 1930-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McKayle, Donald, 1930---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Choreographer

Educator

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, December 17, 2013 and July 28, 2014. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

(Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_001_001, TRT: 1:28:24 ?

Donald McKayle was born on July 6, 1930 in New York City to Eva Cohen McKayle and Philip McKayle, Sr. His mother was born in Ocho Rios, Jamaica to William Cohen, a Jewish immigrant from England who came to Jamaica to manage the sugar plantations of Sir John Pringle. McKayle's father was born in Cornwall Mountain, Jamaica to Maria Mair and John McKayle. McKayle's parents immigrated separately to New York City, where they met at a social event in Harlem's Jamaican community. His father worked as a maintenance man at the Trans-Lux Theater and the Copacabana. His maternal uncle, Gussy Cohen, owned the Jocks Place nightclub, which was located at 137th Street and 7th Avenue and hosted acts like Eartha Kitt. McKayle was raised in the Harlem River Houses, which were the first housing projects built in New York City. He also recalls growing a Victory garden during World War II, and learning to cook from his mother.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_001_002, TRT: 2:29:21 ?

Donald McKayle grew up in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, where his family belonged to St. Luke's Episcopal Church. There, McKayle sang in the choir, and developed an interest in the theatrics of rituals. He attended P.S. 46, Arthur Tappan School, where he performed in puppet shows and was active in the arts program. Outside of school, he pursued his interests in performance, and served as the master of ceremonies for his community's May Day celebration. When McKayle was twelve years old, his family moved to the Bronx, New York. He went on to enroll at DeWitt Clinton High School, where he was elected class president. He also joined the Frederick Douglass Society, and was mentored by the teacher and activist Lewis Allan. McKayle's parents, Eva Cohen McKayle and Philip McKayle, Sr., emphasized their family's Jamaican heritage. McKayle spoke patois at home, and once saw the King and Queen of England in a parade.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_001_003, TRT: 3:29:29 ?

Donald McKayle attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York, where he was elected class president. He was also an avid reader, and was active in the performing arts. While in high school, McKayle attended a performance by the dancer and anthropologist Pearl Primus, and decided to pursue a career as a concert dancer. During his senior year, McKayle auditioned for the New Dance Group. He received a scholarship, and enrolled in classes in 1947. As a member of the New Dance Group, McKayle performed his original piece 'Saturday's Child' at the Club Baron in New York City's Harlem neighborhood alongside Paul Robeson, Leon Bibb and Harry Belafonte.

McKayle remained with the New Dance Group until 1951, when he joined a contemporary dance company led by Daniel Nagrin. There, he choreographed his first group piece, 'Games.' Later in 1951, McKayle decided to form his own troupe, Donald McKayle and Company, where he directed Arthur Mitchell, Alvin Ailey and Carmen De Lavallade.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_001_004, TRT: 4:28:19 ?

Donald McKayle formed the Donald McKayle and Company dance troupe in 1951. That year, he debuted his first piece of group choreography, 'Games,' for which his father, Philip McKayle, Sr., designed and built the set. McKayle's early performances with his company included original works like 'Her Name was Harriet,' 'Nocturne' and 'Rainbow Round My Shoulder.' In 1954, McKayle replaced Alvin Ailey in the Broadway production of 'House of Flowers' after Ailey sustained an injury. In this production, McKayle danced with Carmen De Lavallade and Geoffrey Holder. From 1955 to 1956, McKayle joined the Martha Graham Dance Company for an international tour of Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Israel, which was funded by the U.S. Department of State. McKayle then returned to the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, where he was active with the Committee for the Negro in the Arts alongside performing artists like Paul Robeson and Harry Belafonte.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_001_005, TRT: 5:28:52 ?

Donald McKayle served as the dance captain for the original Broadway production of 'West Side Story,' which premiered in 1957. McKayle worked on the show until 1960, when he earned his first television spot. That year, three of his dances were broadcast live on PBS. In 1963, McKayle began choreographing television programs like 'The Ed Sullivan Show' and the Academy Awards. He went on to be selected as the lead choreographer for Walt Disney Productions' 'Bedknobs and Broomsticks' in 1970. McKayle later moved to Los Angeles, California, where he became the head of the Inner City Repertory Dance Company. He also created the choreography for television shows and films like 'The Great White Hope,' which starred James Earl Jones. In 1974, McKayle returned to New York City to choreograph and direct the Broadway production of 'Raisin,' which was based on Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun' and featured dancers like Debbie Allen.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_002_006, TRT: 6:28:34 ?

Donald McKayle choreographed 'Rainbow Round My Shoulder' for Donald McKayle and Company in 1959. The dance depicted the lives of a group of chain gang workers in the South, and was performed throughout the United States and Europe that year. His company went on to perform the work in the Soviet Union through a cultural exchange program. McKayle returned to the United States in 1960. He then created a piece about the life of Harriet Tubman titled 'They Called Her Moses,' which was broadcast on the CBS television program 'Camera Three.' In 1962, McKayle choreographed and produced 'District Storyville,' which chronicled the birth of jazz music in the red light district of New Orleans, Louisiana. That year, McKayle also received a Golden Eagle Award for his performance in the jazz dance film 'On the Sound.' In 1964, McKayle returned to Broadway, where he served as the choreographer for 'Golden Boy,' starring Sammy Davis, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_002_007, TRT: 7:29:25 ?

Donald McKayle choreographed 'Songs of the Disinherited' in 1972. The dance depicted the struggle of diasporic Africans in the Americas. In a series of four movements, McKayle chronicled the lives of African Americans from slavery through the Great Depression. The piece was anchored by the solo performance

“Angelitos Negros,” which featured the vocals of Roberta Flack. In 1974, McKayle received an Emmy nomination for his work on the television special ‘Free to Be... You and Me,’ which featured celebrity entertainers like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross and Harry Belafonte. Also in 1974, McKayle choreographed and directed the Broadway musical production of ‘Raisin,’ which received the Tony Award for Best Musical. The following year, he was appointed artistic director of the Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, California. In 1977, McKayle choreographed the film ‘Minstrel Man,’ which starred Glynn Turman.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald McKayle, Section A2013_342_002_008, TRT: 8:31:50 ?

Donald McKayle choreographed the original Broadway production of ‘Sophisticated Ladies,’ a musical revue based upon the life and music of Duke Ellington. The show starred tap dancer Gregory Hines and singer Phyllis Hyman, and ran in 1981. In 1989, McKayle joined the faculty of the University of California, Irvine. A decade later, he choreographed his final Broadway production, ‘It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues,’ which chronicled the history of blues music from African chants and spirituals to the Mississippi Delta and Chicago styles of the blues. In 2001, McKayle choreographed ‘Tantalus,’ a ten-hour Greek tragedy about the Trojan War. In 2002, he published his autobiography, ‘Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life’, which was adapted into the television documentary ‘Donald McKayle: Heartbeats of a DanceMaker’ in 2004. McKayle concludes the interview by talking about his family, and reflecting upon his career, repertoire and how he would like to be remembered.