

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ruth Beckford

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Beckford, Ruth
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford,
Dates:	March 31, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:08:00).
Abstract:	Choreographer and dancer Ruth Beckford (1925 - 2019) toured with the legendary Katherine Dunham for fifteen years, founded the first recreational modern dance department in the United States, and also helped found the Oakland Dance Association and the Black Dance Association. Beckford was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 31, 2002, in Oakland, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_031
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ruth Beckford was born on December 7, 1925, in Oakland, California, to Cora and Felix Beckford. She began dancing at age three with Florelle Batsford, who taught Beckford ballet, flamenco, hula, baton, toe-tap and acrobatics over the next 15 years. In 1943, Beckford toured with the legendary Katherine Dunham.

After graduating from Oakland Technical High School in 1944, Beckford began studying with Anna Halprin and Welland Lathrop. She was the first African American member of their companies. In 1947, Beckford became the first black member of the Orchesis Modern Dance Honor Society at the University of California, Berkeley and she founded the first recreational modern dance department in the United States at the Oakland Department of Parks and Recreation that same year. In 1950, she helped found the Oakland Dance Association.

In 1953, Beckford taught at the Katherine Dunham School in New York and opened the Ruth Beckford African-Haitian Dance Company. She helped found the Black Dance Association in 1965, and in 1970 she played a similar role for the Cultural Ethnic Affairs Guild. She also served as a dance panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts. Beckford closed her dance studio in 1975, but still continued to perform. She began acting with the Oakland Ensemble Theatre, where she co-wrote, produced and starred in "'Tis the Morning of My Life," an off-Broadway success. She played major roles in television shows and film, including *Angels in the Outfield*, *The Principal*, and *Midnight Caller*.

Beckford turned her attention toward serving the less fortunate members of society in 1990. She counseled homeless people at the Berkeley office of the Department of Social Services until 1997, when she became a life skills counselor at the Oakland Private Industry Council. In 2000, she became the president of the African American Museum Library Coalition.

Ruth Beckford was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 31, 2002.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ruth Beckford was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 31, 2002, in Oakland, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and dancer Ruth Beckford (1925 - 2019) toured with the legendary Katherine Dunham for fifteen years, founded the first recreational modern dance department in the United States, and also helped found the Oakland Dance Association and the Black Dance Association.

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:

Beckford, Ruth

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Beckford, Ruth--Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews.

African American actresses--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

Choreographer

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 Ruth Beckford, March 31, 2002. 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 Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_001, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins by describing her father's and mother's personalities and backgrounds. She remembers her household being filled with love, support, and encouragement. Beckford recalls her first memories of dancing for her family at social events. Beckford describes growing up in Oakland, California, detailing the multiracial environment, which she found to be relatively harmonious. Beckford talks about her first formal dance training as a child, describing her experience as the only African American dancer in her studio. She details the different forms of dance she studied under Florelle Batsford and Katherine Dunham. Beckford describes her early successes as a dancer, noting that she started receiving pay as early as age eight. Beckford closes by outlining her experiences in grammar school and describing her childhood personality.

African American families--California--Oakland.

Childhood and youth--Activities--California--Oakland.

African American dancers--California--Oakland.

Education, Primary--California--Oakland.

Dunham, Katherine.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_002, TRT: 0:29:58 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins by describing the positive influences her parents had on her personal development, praising her father's work ethic and her mother's free spirit. She recalls a memorable dance recital at which she excelled despite spraining her ankle. Beckford then explains how the attack on Pearl Harbor and the start of World War II affected her life and the lives of others in the San Francisco Bay Area. She describes her high school experience, detailing how she excelled at a mostly white high school. Beckford then describes the various styles of dance which she practiced. She closes by detailing her first meeting with legendary dancer Katherine Dunham. Beckford describes how she was accepted into Dunham's dance company at age seventeen, and spent six weeks learning Dunham's method and touring with the company.

African American parents--Attitudes.

Pearl Harbor (Hawaii), Attack on, 1941.

Education, Secondary--California--Oakland.

Katherine Dunham Company.

Dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_003, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins by briefly recounting what she learned during her time dancing with Katherine Dunham's dance company. Beckford discusses her quick progression through Modern dance classes at the University of California, Berkeley, which led to her invitation to study Modern dance at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop. She explains how her versatile dancing skills enabled her to adapt to many different styles of dance. Beckford then details her work teaching recreational dance classes to girls from Oakland's inner city. She explains how she nurtured and mothered her students, who did not always have good parental influences. Beckford explains why her dance classes made it easy to leave Cal before finishing her degree. Beckford then criticizes contemporary dance artists for being too concerned with money rather than their art. She briefly explains why interracial marriage was prevalent in Katherine Dunham's dance company. Beckford closes by explaining her decision not to have children of her own,

choosing instead to focus on her students.

Katherine Dunham Company.

University of California, Berkeley.

San Francisco Dancers' Workshop.

African American dance teachers--California.

Dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_004, TRT: 0:31:19 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins with a discussion about the discipline she instilled in her dance students, and explains why such discipline was beneficial. Beckford describes her trip to Haiti, where she researched the culture so that she could incorporate Haitian and African influences in her choreography. She explains how she combined African and Haitian dance in her studio and why she kept these classes separate from her Modern dance classes. Beckford then details the creative process behind her choreography. Beckford talks about her volunteer efforts working in children's dance and theater after her retirement. She explains why her retirement from dance is satisfying. Beckford then describes her forays into stage and film acting, which became her second career. She closes by describing the production and performance of the first play she wrote.

Ruth Beckford African-Haitian Dance Company.

Travel--Haiti.

Choreography and dance.

Acting--California--Oakland.

Playwriting.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_005, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins by describing her experience writing, producing, and performing in her trilogy of plays 'Tis the Morning of My Life,' explaining why the plays were so successful. Beckford then discusses acting in several motion pictures, often collaborating with her former student Ron Stacker Thompson. She discusses her projects as president of the African American Museum Library Coalition. Beckford talks about the declining theater scene in Oakland, and details her attempts to revive it. Beckford moves on to her writing career, first discussing how she was chosen to write a biography for Katherine Dunham. Beckford then details the publishing process behind her successful book of affirmations for women, and briefly mentions an unpublished book. Beckford closes by talking about her long friendship with Maya Angelou.

Playwriting.

Acting--California.

Thompson, Ron Stacker.

African American Museum Library Coalition.

Angelou, Maya.

African American authors.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_006, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford begins by giving her opinion about what defines a true artist. She continues, discussing the second-class status attributed to most African American artists in the United States. She briefly discusses the importance of the hip-hop dance style. Beckford then explains why she thinks dance is worse off for emphasizing technique over emotions. Beckford briefly mentions her interest in arts and crafts. She then details her concerns about the future of the black community, revealing that she is particularly worried about

how sex affects black teenaged girls. Beckford also describes the volunteer social work she does with African American youth. Beckford discusses her legacy, stressing the need to live a life filled with enjoyment and fun. Beckford closes the interview by talking about the importance of friendship amongst women. Following the interview, Beckford describes a series of eighteen photos, depicting Beckford's family, friends, and dance career.

African American dance.

Social work with African Americans--California.

Relationships.

Photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Beckford, Section A2002_031_001_007, TRT: 0:06:34 ?

Dancer Ruth Beckford describes seven photos, including images from her dance career, social work, stage career, and writing career.

Photographs.