

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Carmen De Lavallade

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	De Lavallade, Carmen, 1931-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 12, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Choreographer and dancer Carmen De Lavallade (1931 - ) performed in films, television and in live performances, including the operas, "Aida," and "Samson and Delilah." In 2004, De Lavallade received the Black History Month Lifetime Achievement Award, the Rosie Award and the Bessie Award in 2006. De Lavallade was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_162
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Choreographer and dancer Carmen De Lavallade was born on March 6, 1931, to Grace Grenot and Leo Paul De Lavallade in Los Angeles, California. There, her aunt, Adele De Lavallade, owned the Hugh Gordon Book Shop, one of the first African American history bookshops on Central Avenue. Her cousin, Janet Collins, was the first African American prima ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. De Lavallade discovered her talent for dance early. In 1945, she began studying ballet with Melissa Blake, and at the age of sixteen, upon graduation from Thomas Jefferson High School, she was awarded a scholarship to study dance with the renowned Lester Horton.

In 1949, De Lavallade became a member of the celebrated Lester Horton Dance Theater, where from 1950 to 1954, she enjoyed the status of lead dancer. During this time, De Lavallade continued to study dance, becoming proficient in ballet and other forms of modern and ethnic dance. Lester Horton insisted that she study other art forms, including painting, acting, music, set design and costuming. De Lavallade began studying ballet privately with Italian ballerina Carmelita Maracci and later acting with Stella Adler. In 1954, De Lavallade made her Broadway debut in *House of Flowers*, and that same year, Alvin Ailey, the founder of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, moved to New York City to partner with her in that production.

During that engagement in 1955, De Lavallade met and married dancer and actor Geoffrey Holder. With Holder, she completed her signature solo, *Come Sunday*, which he suggested choreographing to a black spiritual, sung by Odetta Gordon. In 1956, De Lavallade danced as the prima ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera performances of *Samson and Delilah*, and *Aida*. Also in 1956, she made her television debut in John Butler's ballet *Flight*, and in 1957, she appeared in the television production of Duke Ellington's *A Drum Is a Woman*. In pursuit of an acting, Lena Horne introduced her to the executives at Twentieth Century Fox, and between 1952 and 1955, she appeared in several films, including *Carmen Jones* with Dorothy Dandridge. In 1959, she starred in *Odds Against Tomorrow*

with Harry Belafonte. De Lavallade also appeared in several off-Broadway productions, including *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman*.

By the early 1960s, De Lavallade was a principal guest performer with Alvin Ailey's company and on the company's first European tour in 1962, the billing was De Lavallade-Ailey American Dance Company. In 1964, she danced with Donald McKayle and in 1965 appeared in Agnes deMille's American Ballet Theater productions of *The Four Marys* and *The Frail Quarry*. In 1970, De Lavallade joined the prestigious Yale School of Drama as a choreographer and performer-in-residence. She staged musicals, plays and operas, and later became a professor and member of the Yale Repertory Theater. Between 1990 and 1993, De Lavallade returned to the Metropolitan Opera as choreographer for *Porgy and Bess* and *Die Meistersinger*.

In 2004, De Lavallade received the Black History Month Lifetime Achievement Award, the Rosie Award and the Bessie Award in 2006.

De Lavallade resides in New York City with her husband, Geoffrey Holder.

De Lavallade was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 12, 2006.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Carmen De Lavallade was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 12, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and dancer Carmen De Lavallade (1931 - ) performed in films, television and in live performances, including the operas, "Aida," and "Samson and Delilah." In 2004, De Lavallade received the Black History Month Lifetime Achievement Award, the Rosie Award and the Bessie Award in 2006.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

De Lavallade, Carmen, 1931-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

De Lavallade, Carmen, 1931---Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Dancer

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Choreographer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## 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 Carmen De Lavallade, December 12, 2006. 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:48 ?

Carmen De Lavallade was born on March 6, 1931 to Grace Grenot De Lavallade and Leo Paul De Lavallade in Los Angeles, California. Her maternal ancestors came from Canada and settled in New Orleans, Louisiana, where her mother was born in 1904. De Lavallade's paternal ancestor, a white plantation owner, was originally from Chateaufort-du-Pape, France. De Lavallade's father was born in 1904 in Marksville, Louisiana. In the 1920s, his family relocated to Los Angeles, where he worked as a bricklayer, and later as a postman. When De Lavallade was eight years old, her mother entered a sanitarium, leaving De Lavallade and her two sisters to be raised by their father's family in Los Angeles. There, they grew up in a majority Latino neighborhood. In Vernon, California, they attended Vernon City Elementary School and St. Martha's Church. De Lavallade's cousin, Janet Collins, was one of the first prima ballerinas of color, and inspired De Lavallade's dancing ambition. She also recalls her childhood holidays.

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Carmen De Lavallade attended Vernon City Elementary School, a majority Latino school in Vernon, California, where she learned folk dances and performed in her first play. At Dr. George Washington Carver Junior High School in Los Angeles, she met Alvin Ailey. During this time, she began her training in ballet and modern dance with Melissa Blake, a white instructor in Hollywood. De Lavallade then attended Thomas Jefferson High School, where her classmates included Ailey and O.C. Smith. For a school assembly, she and another student performed a dramatic rendition of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Scheherazade.' Her senior year, she received a scholarship to train with Lester Horton on Melrose Avenue. She remembers when Bella Lewitzky left the Lester Horton Dance Theater after testifying to the House Un-American Activities Committee. De Lavallade talks about her cousins, Janet Collins, who danced with Talley Beatty, and Alma Collins, who studied in French at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Carmen De Lavallade began her modern dance training at the Lester Horton Dance Theater in Los Angeles, California. There, she studied the Lester Horton Technique with dancers Joyce Trisler and James Truitte, and designer Rudy Gernreich. Following Bella Lewitzky's departure from the company, De Lavallade performed the lead in Horton's 'Salome,' and in Federico Garcia Lorca's 'Yerma' to positive reviews. She trained with Carmelita Maracci to

improve her ballet technique. When Horton passed away in 1953, Frank Eng assumed control, and the company underwent significant changes. De Lavallade opted to leave the company. She and Alvin Ailey were cast as dancers in the film, 'Carmen Jones,' starring Dorothy Dandridge. De Lavallade then joined the dance ensemble in 'House of Flowers,' for which she and Ailey relocated to New York City. There, they were met with skepticism by the other dancers. She also describes the business of dance, and talks about how the profession has not been taken seriously.

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Carmen De Lavallade danced in a number choreographed by Jack Cole for the film 'Lydia Bailey' in Haiti. She describes Cole's technique, as well as the makeup used in the film. On the set of 'House of Flowers,' she met her husband, Geoffrey Holder, who encouraged her to collaborate with other dance companies. In 1957, De Lavallade performed as Madame Zaji in Duke Ellington's 'A Drum Is a Woman' on live television. She then toured Southeast Asia with Alvin Ailey's company. Returning to the United States, she appeared in 'Odds Against Tomorrow' with Harry Belafonte and Cicely Tyson. On 'The Ed Sullivan Show,' she performed in a duet with Claude Thompson, as she was barred from partnering with Glen Tetley, a white dancer. In the 1960s, she danced for the first time at the Metropolitan Opera in 'Aida' and 'Samson and Delilah.' At this time, she began her transition to acting, and joined the faculty at New Haven's Yale School of Drama, led by Robert Brustein. She recalls learning pointe from Carmelita Maracci.

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Carmen De Lavallade was an instructor at the Yale School of Drama in New Haven, Connecticut, where she interacted with many actors and playwrights, including Adrienne Kennedy. She also performed in Yale Repertory Theater productions, like 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' with Christopher Lloyd. She understudied as Googie Gomez in Terrence McNally's 'The Ritz.' At the Roundabout Theatre Company, she portrayed Emilia in 'Othello,' starring Earle Hyman. She performed in Agnes de Mille's 'The Four Marys' with Judith Jamison and Glory Van Scott with New York City's American Ballet Theatre. She worked with Maurice Hines, Jr.'s project, Ballet Tap USA, and performed as a soloist with Benny Goodman and Bill Evans. She also choreographed a Metropolitan Opera production of 'Lucia di Lammermoor,' which was not well received. De Lavallade shares her idea for a play featuring jazz music, and reflects upon aging as a performer. She identifies 'The Cosby Show' as one of the few programs that properly addresses youth issues.

Video Oral History Interview with Carmen De Lavallade, Section A2006\_162\_001\_006, TRT: 0:20:37 ?

Carmen De Lavallade and Gus Solomons, Jr. collaborated with Gus Solomons Jr and Dudley Williams on Paradigm Dance Company, a dance project for mature performers. For the company, Dwight Rhoden choreographed 'It All,' a piece set to music by Bjork. From her experience at the Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, she developed a monologue, 'Willie's Lady Sings the Blues,' which incorporates lines from Shakespearean characters, like Emilia and Lady Macbeth. De Lavallade's husband, Geoffrey Holder, choreographed 'The Creation' for her, and the piece became one of her signature performances. De Lavallade talks about learning from one's past, and the importance of originality in performance and self-expression. She reflects upon her life, as well as

changes in the world of dance, particularly in terms of dancers' technical ability, physicality and compensation. De Lavallade also describes how she would like to be remembered.