



OLA SHANKS

DUNHAM/PRIMUS INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM LEGENDARY ARTIST AWARD

Ola Marie Skanks (Shepherd) passed away August 13, 2018, in Toronto, Ontario, after a short illness. Skanks was a pioneering figure in the development of African diasporic dances in Canada and instrumental in growing Canada's emerging modern dance scene in the early 1960s.

After teaching herself how to tap dance at a young age, Skanks began performing professionally in her home city of Toronto. She studied Eurocentric dance styles with highly esteemed dancer and choreographer Willy Blok Hanson before becoming more interested in dances stemming from her African heritage. She reached out to universities in Ghana and Nigeria while also learning dances directly from Nigerian students who were on exchange at the University of Toronto in the 1950s. She also studied with American dancer, choreographer and anthropologist Pearl Primus.

Skanks' work merged European interpretive dance forms with dances and movement of the African diaspora. This influence flowed through her choreography, her teaching and her fashion design. Throughout her life, she performed, taught and choreographed in Toronto and the United States for both stage and screen, with clients including CBC, Mariposa Folk Festival, Caribana and the San Diego Museum of Art. She was on the faculty at the University of New York in Buffalo and taught at the Three Schools Artists' Workshop in Toronto. In 1974, Skanks opened her own studio in Toronto.

In March 2018, Skanks was inducted into Dance Collection Danse (DCD)'s Encore! Dance Hall of Fame. The initiative was first launched in 1986 to reconstruct and preserve choreographies created by Canadian dance artists and was one of the first instances of acknowledging dance history in Canada. Skanks was inducted into the Hall of Fame alongside Veronica Tennant, Danny Grossman, René Highway, Karen Jamieson, Alan and Blanche Lund, Jeanne Renaud and Rina Singha.

The ninety-two-year-old dancer was also recently featured in *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900 to 1970*. Presented by DCD and curated by dance artist, educator and scholar Seika Boye, the exhibit was focused on illuminating the largely undocumented dance history of the Black population in Canada before 1970.

Boye reflects on her meetings with Skanks:

Ola was first and foremost an extraordinary human being. Her openness to my visiting her home was to speak out against racism in Canada and to advocate for the inclusion of African-Canadian and Indigenous history in educating young people today; only after that was she interested in talking about dance.

Her dancing life and contributions from the 1950s and beyond were outstanding because in many ways she was working in isolation in terms of working across dance forms, borders, communities and disciplines. Ola was a dancer, an educator, a designer, an athlete, a visionary, an advocate, a mother, a humanitarian. I did not ever see her perform onstage, but once in her living room, she rose up out of her chair with vigour, aged ninety, and lifted her arms upwards with a gesture that carried a lifetime of belief in the power of dance. This was her gift to so many – long before her induction into the Encore! Hall of Fame. I am grateful to have met her and her daughter Cindy when I did.

After being presented at the DCD gallery, the show toured to Ignite Gallery in Toronto's Kensington Market. Skanks passed one day after the show closed.

A memorial gathering occurred on Tuesday, September 4, 2018, in at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. Donations may be made in her memory to Kahnawake Youth Centre.