

Ola Skanks: Delayed Recognition of a Dance Artist Ahead of Her Time

BY SEIKA BOYE

Abstract: This essay chronicles my research relationship with choreographer, teacher, educator, and activist Ola Skanks. Canadian-born and of West Indian (St. Lucia and Barbados) descent, Skanks was a groundbreaking dance and fashion design artist who combined modern, Western art forms with traditional dances of the Africa diaspora. I share excerpts from my work to date, including my archival exhibition, *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*, to provide context for the circumstances that Black people danced in, socially and/or as performers. This is followed by a selection of photos from Skanks's archival collection that illustrate the scope of her creative and community contributions. In conclusion, I offer a transcription of a speech I gave when Skanks was inducted into the Dance Collection Danse's 2018 Encore! Dance Hall of Fame, alongside some of Canada's most well-known dance artists and community builders. I detail some of the highlights of my meetings with her and also the profundity of the delayed recognition of a woman so far ahead of her time.

Keywords: Black Canadians, dance history, women in archives

Résumé : Le présent essai relate ma relation de recherche avec la chorégraphe, enseignante, éducatrice et militante Ola Skanks. Canadienne d'ascendance antillaise (Sainte-Lucie et Barbade), Skanks est une artiste de la danse et créatrice de mode révolutionnaire qui fusionne les formes artistiques modernes et occidentales avec des danses traditionnelles issues de la diaspora africaine. Dans cette publication je partage des extraits de travaux que j'ai réalisés à ce jour, notamment mon exposition d'archives, *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*, afin de mettre en contexte les circonstances dans lesquelles les Noirs ont pratiqué la danse, socialement et/ou comme artistes. Je présente ensuite une sélection de photos tirées de la collection d'archives de Skanks qui illustrent l'étendue de ses contributions sur le plan de la création et communautaire. En conclusion, je propose une retranscription du discours que j'ai prononcé à l'occasion de l'intronisation de Skanks au Temple de la renommée de Dance Collection Danse en 2018, aux côtés de quelques-uns des plus célèbres artistes de la danse et bâtisseurs communautaires canadiens. J'expose en détail quelques points saillants de mes différentes rencontres avec cette artiste ainsi que la profondeur de la reconnaissance tardive d'une femme qui fut en avance sur son temps.

Mots clés : Canadiens Noirs, histoire de la danse, femmes dans les archives

Ola Skanks (née Shepard) was born in 1926 in Toronto (see [Figure 1](#)). Her father was from Barbados and her mother from St. Lucia; they immigrated to Toronto in 1918. Early on, Ola learned to tap dance by copying what she saw



Figure 1: Ola Skanks, 2018.

Source: Photo by Liliana Reyes. Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse.

in movies and then performed professionally at various venues and events around Toronto, including the Elks' Club and Home Service Association events in the 1940s. After her four daughters were born, she returned to dancing and trained in Western interpretive dance forms with Willy Blok Hanson. Hanson was of French–Indonesian (maternal) and Dutch–Chinese decent (paternal) and born in Java (part of present-day Indonesia). At her studio, the Fine Art of Movement Academy, she taught Javanese, Balinese, Sumatran, and North Indian traditional dance, modern dance, and posture classes.¹ After learning with Hanson, Ola was inspired to learn more about her African heritage; she reached out to universities in Ghana

1 Seika Boye, "Willy Blok Hanson Obituary," *The Dance Current Magazine*, March/April 2013.

and Nigeria and learned dances directly from Nigerian students on exchange at the University of Toronto in the 1950s. She also took classes with African-American dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Pearl Primus in Buffalo. Skanks worked to merge Western interpretive dance forms and dances of the African Diaspora in her choreographic work, teaching, and fashion design. She performed, taught, and choreographed extensively in Toronto and the United States for stage and television including CBC, the Mariposa Folk Festival, Caribana, and the San Diego Museum of Art (see Figure 2). She was on faculty at the University of New York (Buffalo) and taught at the Three Schools Artists' Workshop in Toronto. She opened her own studio in 1974, located on Yonge Street (see Figure 3). Ola Skanks died 13 August 2018.

I first met Skanks in late 2014, when I was interviewing people for my doctoral dissertation, focused on dance within Toronto's Black population in the 1950s. Our relationship spanned nearly four years until her death in 2018 at the age of 92. Following our initial meeting, I continued to reconnect with Skanks. The first instance was through introducing her to the Dance Collection Danse (DCD) Archives (and former publisher), Canada's only dedicated dance archives. I suggested to Ola early on that her legacy should be protected and made available to future researchers and citizens. She welcomed this idea and granted DCD permission to digitize the ephemera from her dancing life. I had worked at DCD for seven years and trusted that Executive and Curatorial Director Amy Bowring would treat these documents with both the material and emotional care that this work required. The documents contained inside were the traces of over three decades of creative activity and business ingenuity. They were also the record of a prolific Black creative force who had not been given even a trace of the recognition that her contributions warranted. Many of the digitized items also became a part of my archival exhibition *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*, a project commissioned by DCD.² This critically acclaimed exhibition documents both the role of dance in Canada's Black populations and the contributions of Black dancing artists, teachers, and communities to the cultural fabric of the Canadian nation state. *It's About Time* had four iterations, three in Toronto (DCD Gallery 2018; OCAD Ignite Gallery 2018; Theatre Centre/Progress Festival 2019). In 2020 the exhibition format expanded to include commissions from contemporary visual, literary, and performing artists to respond to the exhibition itself.³ Ola was one

2 Boye, *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*, Archival Exhibition, Dance Collection Danse Gallery, January 2019.

3 The virtual exhibition of *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970 and Now* can be accessed via the link <dancingblackcanada.ca>.

THE LEADER-POST, REGINA.

Movies of the '30s inspire interpretative dancing

By DONNA JANUSSON
(Staff Reporter)

Betty Grable, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers may not know it, but their movies of the '30s inspired a young Toronto girl to make a specialty of interpretative dancing.

Mrs. John (Ola) Skanks, 125 Miller Cr., explained in an interview at her home Tuesday how she and her sister, by studying the routines of the dancers in the musicals, learned enough tap dancing to dance professionally, billing themselves as the Shepherd Sisters.

"Even when I was a little girl in Toronto I always wanted to dance. But those were depression years and our parents just couldn't afford dancing lessons for us. So my sister and I would take our nickels and go to the movies, then go home and work out the dance steps by ourselves," she said.

Mrs. Skanks gave up dancing professionally after her marriage but returned to it in a new form about eight years ago.

"I studied interpretative dancing for about five months in Toronto, but they weren't teaching what I wanted. So I left and went ahead on my own. I gathered material about African dances from books at the library. The dances I do are based on authentic African dances but they are my own interpretation of the originals," she explained.

FOUR DAUGHTERS

Mrs. Skanks came to Regina in November with her husband, manager of the Regina office of Encyclopedia Britannica, and their four daughters, Roberta, 13, Donna, 11, Marianne, 9, and three-year-old Cindy.

Reginans who attended "Stage '83," the variety show presented by students at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina campus, will recall the African dance sequences performed by Mrs. Skanks, Donna and Marianne.


"I'd like to do another show in Regina," she said, adding that she has hopes of obtaining pupils, "children and, if they're interested, adults as well," and starting her own dance studio.

Before the family left Toronto, Mrs. Skanks appeared with Marianne and Donna on WGR-TV, Buffalo, N.Y., and Mrs. Skanks took part in a USO competition, the winners of which went to Europe to entertain American servicemen stationed there. She placed second in the group of 300 performers in the group act to go as of

father's flair for drawing. Two abstracts by Mr. Skanks, one in oils and the other in pastel crayon, along with a charcoal portrait of Donna, decorate the walls of the Skanks home.

Will any of the three younger girls become professional dancers?

"I hope so, but if they don't it won't worry me," Mrs. Skanks said. "Whatever they choose in life is what I want for them. But I do think every little girl should have dancing lessons. It's an outlet for expression and it gives them poise and self confidence."



—Leader-Post photo

INTERPRETIVE TRIO: Mrs. John Skanks demonstrates a dance position to her daughter Donna, 11, while Marianne, 9, looks on. The group has performed its interpretations of African dances in Toronto, where the family made its home until November, and recently in Regina. Mrs. Skanks, a former professional tap dancer, began studying interpretative dances eight years ago.

Figure 2: Toronto-based dancer, teacher, and choreographer Ola Skanks spent a year in Regina, Saskatchewan, with her husband and their four daughters. Skanks, who had been teaching and performing in Toronto, quickly became involved in the local Regina scene. During her time there she opened a studio in her home to invite Indigenous children from the nearby reserve to take lessons. Skanks's proposal to give lessons on the reserve was denied by local government officials. Regina is located on Treaty 4 Territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.

Source: Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse. Material republished with the express permission of *Regina Leader-Post*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.



Figure 3: Poster for Ola Skanks Studios, 1977.
Source: Dance Collection Danse Poster Collection. Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse.

of five performing artists featured in the exhibition, which introduced her to a broader contemporary public for the first time.

My work with Ola's collection will continue for years to come. To follow are excerpts from my work to date, including excerpts from *It's About Time*, to provide context for the circumstances that Black people danced in, both socially and as performers. This is followed by a selection of photos from Ola's archival collection that illustrate the scope of her creative and community contributions (see Figure 4). In conclusion, I offer a transcription of a speech I gave when Ola was inducted into the Dance Collection Danse's 2018 Encore! Dance Hall of Fame,⁴ alongside some of Canada's

4 The Encore! Dance Hall of Fame was initiated by Dance Collection Danse in 1983 and recognized nine trailblazers in Canadian dance. Another induction was not held until 2018. It has continued with an annual event. Learn more at <dcdhalloffame.com/>.

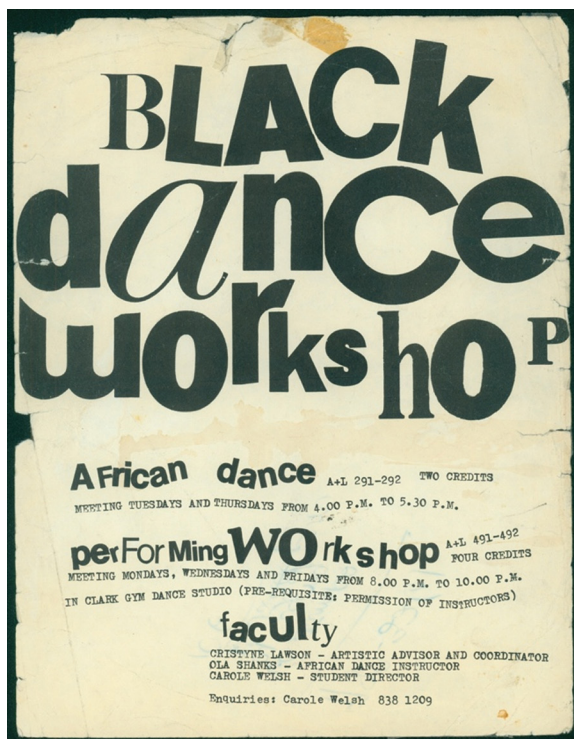


Figure 4: Poster for Black Dance Workshop. Location and date unknown. Source: Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse.

most well-known dance artists and community builders. In it, I detail some of the highlights of my meetings with her and also the profundity of the delayed recognition of a woman so far ahead of her time.

The following photo essay features a selection from the didactic panels in *It's About Time*, including "Curator's Message," "Dance in and for Community," and "Performing Artists and the Stage." Ola Skanks was both a performer and a teacher, alongside her exceptional skills as a seamstress and fashion designer.

CURATOR'S MESSAGE

It's About Time brings together new research alongside recorded dance histories of Canada's Black population, 1900–1970. The result is an overview of the dance floor and the stage, dance lessons, protests and activism, and insight into representations of Blackness and media reception of performances. Accumulated here are various artists, choreographers, dance

forms, venues, geographic locations, cultural and heritage backgrounds, artistic visions and community initiatives. What binds the exhibit together is the socio-political context of these years, which preceded changes to immigration laws, the subsequent increase of the Black population during the 1970s and forward, and multicultural policy. Through this lens, we see the nuanced negotiations and triumph of Black people dancing. Looking to Black people dancing in Canadian history carries the potential for insight into social, artistic, and leisure cultures, legislation, transnational relations, racism, and integration. There is so much to learn — the source material is all around us. We just have to know how and where to look for it. The archival exhibit spans the years 1900–1970. From 1900 to 1967, Canada’s immigration policies were increasingly racist and exclusionary, providing the government with power to arbitrarily deny unwanted peoples admission into the country. In 1910–1911, the Black population was targeted when “unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada” was added to the list of traits considered inadmissible — a response to the influx of Black migration from Oklahoma into Alberta. This government policy should influence how we perceive the individuals and communities celebrated in this exhibit and impact our understanding of Blackness in Canada from the dance floor to the stage to the street at the present moment.

To date, the history of dance within Canada’s Black population is significantly under-documented in Canadian dance history and in African-Canadian history. Without it, Black dance students and artists and Black dancing citizens cannot know the legacy of our dancing actions in Canada. Without it, we miss out on so much joy, agency, peaceful gathering en masse, resistance, artistic brilliance, and individual expression. Without it, we are incomplete in our self-knowledge and so our potential.

We must continue to dig deeper into this history ... a history that is about all Canadians.

It’s about time.

DANCE IN AND FOR COMMUNITIES

The dances we used to have at the UNIA — they were fantastic! Every Thursday night, of course, at the hall there’d be a dance. Every Thursday night — that was the night that the domestics got off ... The parents would act as chaperones, and they’d sit around if they didn’t dance. They came and they sat there and enjoyed themselves watching the younger people dance.

— Gwen Johnston⁵

5 Cited in Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s–1950s* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991), 170.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Toronto chapter is an example of a community organization that hosted social dances for and/or open to the Black population. Other venues included UNIA chapters in Montréal and Glace Bay, NS; the Home Service Association, Toronto; the Negro Community Centre, Montréal; and the University Settlement House, Toronto. Although each of these advocacy organizations had a different mandate, social dances were common to them all.

While the majority of Black women worked in domestic service, many Black men worked as sleeping car porters for Canadian Pacific and Pullman Railways. Constant travel created a circuit between Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montréal and into the United States through Detroit and Chicago and south to New Orleans. This resulted in the import of African-American cultural materials including newspapers, hair products, clothing, and music. Porters supplied rhythm and blues and rock and roll records that were not otherwise available in Canada. In Toronto, a small number of people had large vinyl collections that they would bring to the different dances.

By mid century, many dances were integrated racially. While this may have been acceptable on the dance floor, it did not reflect attitudes held by society at large and should not be considered an indication that Canada was without prejudice against interracial dating and marriage. These alternative spaces created what were intended as safe spaces for Black and other people marginalized due to their racialized backgrounds, class, religion, or other factors.

Annual Emancipation Day Picnics and popular night clubs, such as the Harlem Nocturne (Vancouver), Rumboogie Inn (Winnipeg), and Rockhead's Paradise (Montréal), provided other popular sites for dancing. Class, religion, gender, cultural background, and generation also impacted who attended which dances and where. Discrimination within the Black community itself is also revealed by examining social dance culture. Many of the older generation frowned upon dancing due to feelings that it both was sacrilegious and perpetuated stereotypes brought about by the minstrel show.

DANCE LESSONS

Dance, community, and integration also overlapped through dance lessons for young people. Lessons in tap and ballet were especially popular and were offered by organizations such as University Settlement House and the Negro Community Centre. Dance lessons at private studios were not open to or financially accessible for many, but there are examples of Black youth training at white studios. This is an area that demands further research so that the history of how dances were transmitted to, by and through Canada's Black population before 1970 is not lost forever.

PERFORMING ARTISTS AND THE STAGE

Much of Canada's previously recorded dance history has been done through biographical research and writing about Black performing artists. Through outstanding individuals who were born in or moved to Canada, it is possible to trace the major trends and shifts in twentieth-century dance and performance. These individuals made their living through dancing. Being a professional entertainer of any kind was one of the few alternatives that Black citizens had to a life working in service as a domestic, porter, or other trade. While there were Black lawyers, doctors, dentists, teachers, and other professionals, the required education, training, and opportunity were not available to the majority. Many professional performers and artists also had teaching careers with prolific and long-lasting impacts on their communities. Len Gibson (Vancouver/Toronto), Ola Skanks (Toronto), Joey Hollingsworth (London), Ethel Bruneau (New York/Montréal), Olga Spencer (Montréal), and Kathryn Brown (Toronto) are examples of Black dance artists in Canada before and into the 1970s. There are other people and legacies that need to be located, documented, and celebrated.

African-American culture influenced and defined much of twentieth-century culture and entertainment in North America and beyond. Dance and music innovations of the Harlem Renaissance, the jook joints of the southern United States, the blues of Chicago and New Orleans, were carried from the streets and clubs to the stage and inevitably across the border into Canada by way of vaudeville, train porters, radio, musicians and dancers, citizens, and cinema and television. While the influence was African-American, the interpretation of these practices and forms in Canada was ... Canadian. There is no one Black dance or dance aesthetic, nor do Black people dancing have the privilege of neutrality. Black dancers and choreographers in Canada and the United States trained, created, innovated, and performed in jazz, ballet, tap, chorus line, musical theatre, burlesque, modern, post-modern, and various West Indian and traditional African forms and participated in social dances with both African Diasporic and North American and European origins, as well as others from around the world. The value of examining the biographies of Black dance artists in Canada is not in trying to define them as a group, or even in noting their similarities. Rather it is to note their outstanding individuality based on cultural backgrounds, geographic locations, dance training and influences, and relationships to class, gender, religion, and sexuality; their artistic choices — both overt and subversive; their range of skills and talents; their teaching legacy; and the ways they have articulated, in their own words, from their own perspectives what it meant to be dancing Black in Canada before 1970.

Through this deep respect for these unique experiences we can be guided in how to see Black people dancing today and continue to disrupt

the legacy of systemic racism that has influenced the representation, reception, and value of Black artists and people into the twenty-first century.

When I met Ola, she had been out of public life for nearly thirty years. In the 1980s, she was entering her sixties and had also suffered the loss of her daughter Marianne Skanks (see [Figure 5](#)), who was also a dancer and a creative collaborator with Ola, to a prolonged illness. Ola stepped away from performing, closed her dance studio, which she had opened in the 1970s (see [Figure 3](#)), and withdrew from public life. She was very proud to have continued playing badminton until her late eighties with a group of treasured friends (and competitors!). Ola considered herself a sports-woman as well as an artist. She was nothing short of extraordinary in her creative drive, physical abilities, business intuition, boundless generosity, and infectious hope, but also in her direct clarity about the crushing, violent impact of racism on Black and Indigenous⁶ communities, as witnessed and experienced throughout her lifetime. When I was invited to introduce Ola upon her induction into the 2018 Encore! Canadian Dance Hall of Fame, it was critical to me that I honour these overlapping qualities.

The Encore! Dance Hall of Fame, which is also a fundraiser for Dance Collection Dance Archives, was re-established in 2018 to celebrate the accomplishments of dance artists and community leaders in Canada. I knew that many of those in attendance would be learning of Ola and her legacy for the first time. *It's About Time* had launched earlier that year, but the majority of those affiliated with and included in the archival collection at DCD are white and from ballet and modern dance backgrounds. DCD's co-founders, Miriam Adams and her late husband Lawrence Adams, were former members of the National Ballet of Canada and deeply involved in the dance sector from the 1970s onward. Their work to build an archive and legacy for dance in Canada was groundbreaking, but it also reflected the narrow and exclusive demographic of people who were/are supported, celebrated, and acclaimed by artistic institutions in Canada. This is shifting through hard and dedicated work on the part of DCD, through relationship building, various partnerships and initiatives, and a belief in the necessity of the work. But the resonances take time. While Ola's career has points of overlap with better known dance communities and people, she was not formerly included in the narratives of Canada's celebrated dance histories.

6 Ola's ex-husband and the father of her four daughters, John "Tahoronhianent" Skanks, was half Indigenous. Nation affiliation unknown to author. Ola and her daughter Cindy were very involved with Indigenous communities. Ola's memorial was held at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto. Roberta Skanks Obituary, *Toronto Star*, 24 February 2016, <[legacy.com/obituaries/thestar/obituary.aspx?n=roberta-skanks&pid=177825666](https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/thestar/obituary.aspx?n=roberta-skanks&pid=177825666)>, accessed 20 May 2020.



Figure 5: Ola Skanks with her daughter Marianne Skanks, 1979.
Source: San Diego History Center.

The Hall of Fame event is formal and in 2018 hosted on the top floor of the Globe and Mail building in downtown Toronto. I had four minutes to share what made Ola so exceptional to me and to so many others.

She was being inducted alongside some of Canada's most well-known artists, including modern and Indigenous dancer and actor René Highway; National Ballet of Canada prima ballerina Veronica Tennant; modern dance artists and artistic directors Danny Grossman, Karen Jamieson, and Jeanne Renaud; Kathak performer and choreographer Rina Singha; film, television, and theatre performers Alan and Blanche Lund; and community builders Joan and Jerry Lozinski.⁷

Here are my words to and about Ola on that evening. She was in attendance with her daughter, Cindy, who had been critical in our work together. Ola passed away in August 2018.

7 For full biographies of The Encore! Dance Hall of Fame 2018 Inductees see <dcdhalloffame.com/2018-inductees>.

Seika Boye: Good afternoon everyone. Congratulations Ola, on being inducted in the Encore! Dance Hall of Fame. We were first introduced because someone in this room, Dr. Selma Odom, took me to a show called *Syncopation: Life in the Key of Black* that was being drafted by Archie Alleyne, the late Archie Alleyne, who was an acclaimed jazz drummer and member of the Order of Canada. He was working to preserve and bring to light the legacy of Black jazz musicians in Canada. Archie said that I had to meet you. I went to meet him when I was working on my dissertation questioning where was Black dance in our Canadian dance history? And, what were Black dancers doing before the 1970s?

When I spoke to Archie, he said that you were the one who held this history, were the one who was so important to making this history. He followed up on this recommendation by giving me your phone number because I couldn't find you through a search on the Internet. This is something that has not left me. It's very important for me to remember in my work as a scholar that sometimes in order to learn something new we need to meet someone new. We don't know the people we need to know to find out the histories that aren't available to us. I think many of the people being honored here tonight have benefited from the work of people like Miriam and Lawrence Adams,⁸ for doing this.

Ola, about ninety minutes into our first meeting⁹ you left the room, and you came back with a large portfolio. You said that it had been under your bed and it was filled with photo clippings, photographs, contracts, newspaper articles — a life in dance. We are here celebrating that legacy.

But what I want to speak about is what I left with after our interview — and that was all the information that I learned about my own legacy. I am also a dancer. I have spent my lifetime dancing. Many of the people who taught me are in this room. Many of the people who I most loved to dance with are in this room, but something missing from my dance experience was the history of Black people dancing in Canada. When I left the interview, I felt like I had been given a gift and that was the gift of understanding my local history, and so I understood myself better. I also understood that when we are listening and documenting the lives of dancers, we are listening to and documenting the lives of people, of mothers — Ola is the mother of four daughters — and people who are living adversities that are sometimes visible and sometimes invisible.

Ola, I thank you for what you shared with me on that day and now with so many people here today. But that was ninety minutes into our interview.

8 Miriam and Lawrence Adams are the co-founders of Dance Collection Danse Archives and former publisher.

9 Skanks, Ola, interview by Seika Boye, March 22, 2014.

When I first sat down you said, “I told Archie that he could give you my phone number not because I wanted to talk about dance but because I want to talk about the legacy of racism in this country. The racism against Black people and other people of colour, and Indigenous people, has been terrible and hateful and shameful.” I want to bring that into the room today to honor why you said I could come to your home and why you shared your stories with me.

I am grateful for the dance stories, but I want us to all welcome your full story. That is the society that you were dancing in, the society that you danced in spite of, and the society that you created a new form in — that I would say was far ahead of your time, in this country.

And so, thank you for your work thank you for sharing your story with us. Congratulations on being inducted into the Encore! Canadian Dance Hall of Fame.¹⁰

Ola Skanks: Good afternoon and thank you for sharing this moment with me. I would like to thank Dance Collection for this celebration today of dance in Canada. There are many people who have contributed to the scope of dancing in Canada.

It is an honor and a privilege to be chosen to receive this Award. I would like to thank Seika Boye and Amy Bowring for their work with me that has made this award possible. For me it has been about teaching children to dance and watching the transformation in them that has been so rewarding. Life isn't about waiting for a storm to pass — rather life is learning how to dance in the rain.¹¹

10 Boye, Seika. Ola Skanks Induction into Encore! Dance Hall of Fame. Speech. 25 March 2018.

11 Ibid.