

Due Unto Dunham

EXTENDING THE LEGACY OF DANCE ANCESTOR KATHERINE DUNHAM (1909-2006)

By Thomas F. DeFrantz

Katherine Dunham, who died last month in New York at the age of 96, changed the way we understand the African diaspora through its physical arts. Prescient, she brought it all together: serious anthropological study based on extensive fieldwork in the Caribbean; entertaining and provocative translations of sacred and social dances for the theater; eminently literary memoirs detailing African American life in the rural suburbs of 1920s Chicago; compelling lectures and unflappable belief in academic inquiry; fabulous beauty; tenacious activism; engaged spiritual leadership; and ferocious faith in dance as a way of being in the world. Taking stock of all she did will occupy generations. I asked women connected to Dunham in various degrees how we can continue her work.

STUDY AND DEVELOP A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Rashida Ismaili, retired educator and writer: "One needs a sense of purpose that goes beyond just living and breathing, toward making a contribution to the world. Miss Dunham had that long before her academic training started. Her fearlessness in the way she did fieldwork was very new in the areas where she was going; she wasn't fluent in the language nor experienced in the cultures in which she found herself. We need to be fearless and go forward to meet the world in a respectful way, accepting the gifts others can give us and the things we have to bring. In the process, all of us learn and gain. Dunham's achievement reminds us to be sharper in our observations, to not be blasé and think we know what we see. Reaching for academic excellence is something to be continued."

READ HISTORY AND COMPREHEND HOW DUNHAM SHAPED AMERICAN ARTS

Constance Valis Hill, associate professor of dance, Hampshire College: "Dunham technique has infused modern technique; we need to give it its due — all those knee drops, ways of isolating the body, using the body fluidly, all of those Afro-Caribbean translations. She didn't just lift the steps from the sacred circle and place them on the stage. What she did was much more sophisticated; she took that material and abstracted it so that when we look at those hinges and isolations, they have symbolic resonance to the

original contexts. Look at *Mambo* (1954) — and at her major films, *Carnival of Rhythm* (1939), and *Stormy Weather* (1943) — then go back and reread the entire modern repertoire in terms of the technique she materialized and codified. Dunham's philosophy meant that teaching Caribbean dances to African American dancers was a way to view diasporic history in the body. When you dance Dunham, you are inscribing that history on your body. Embodying the dance is a way of making connections back to your roots."

LIVE IN THE WORLD AND RESPOND ACCORDINGLY

Sara E. Johnson, assistant professor of English, UC San Diego: "Miss D. was so incredibly aware of what was going on all over the world. She wanted people to be engaged in life, always concerned that they get to know each other — meet each other and germinate relationships. We bear a responsibility to create spaces in our daily surroundings where people can meet and talk about the world beyond performance."

TAKE A STAND AND PUT YOUR BODY WHERE YOUR POLITICS LAND

Marta Vega, founder, New York's Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute: "Dunham's dedication to the East St. Louis community just floored me. In this devastated area, her desire to change the conditions for young people and provide opportunities was immense. The personal sacrifice she made is beyond my comprehension. Like [Marcus] Garvey and DuBois, Dunham saw the world — not just her corner of it. She showed us connections of African people throughout the world."

WORK WITH OTHERS TO SUSTAIN THE EFFORT

Albida Rose, professor of dance, San Francisco State, and director of Dunham technique certification: "Miss Dunham touched so many lives during her 96 years. She gave us the tools not only to be dancers but to be productive and loving individuals who must make positive contributions as members of the world. We must work together and tell the next generation who she was and what she expected of herself and others."

DEVELOP SKILLS TO BE ABLE TO SEE THE WORLD

VèVè A. Clark, associate professor of African American studies, UC Berkeley: "In the academy, performance is pretty low down the list, and when you get to dance, you're in the sub-basement. But Miss Dunham was deeply involved in the social sciences and the arts at the same time. The visual literacy she possessed was overwhelming. I remember talking to her about [her piece] *L'Ag'ya*,

and all I had were some photographs taken from the audience. She looked at them and said, "Oh yes, in this scene, we used baby green footlights." That visual ability was a definite advantage for her in the flow from research to performance. Ultimately, the Caribbean work became a way to improve people's literacy about African culture."

WRITE TO EXPLORE OURSELVES IN THE FLOW OF THE WORLD

Bernadine Jennings, editor in chief, Attitude! The Dancer's Magazine: "Our beloved ancestor Katherine Dunham rattled all the cages of stereotypes and bias against the African diaspora. Her research, published books and articles, travels, performances, and more had a worldwide impact. We make this covenant with our ancestors to continue this exploration of ourselves as subjects rather than objects of a sideshow — to

reduce, and where possible eliminate, the absence of information and acknowledgment of our input to world culture."

DANCE DUNHAM AND BECOME PHYSICALLY PREPARED

Joan Peters, Dunham technique instructor, Ailey School: "I came to Dunham as a baby — about five years old — and I came up strong as an adult. Dunham technique makes you so strong, you can do any type of work you want to do. But her [stage] works need to be done again, and we've got to keep her technique going, to carry it on."

If social movements begin as physical movements, we must dance Dunham to give her her due: striving toward her example of an engaged life, richly lived, in the service of sharing knowledge among people. She never stopped moving; neither should we. ▣



An infotainment pioneer: Dunham in 1955

Bettman/Corbis

Getting to Know Her

Shout "kaiso" and you call "bravo" to a career of unmitigated achievement. It doesn't get better than a volume of writings by and about Katherine Dunham, and *Kaiso!* (Studies in Dance History/University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, 698pp. \$24.95) stands as a remarkable testament to her life's work. Begin with Dunham and then applaud co-editors VèVè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson for producing this essential resource. They built on the mimeographed copies previously prized by those in the family, augmenting them with recent scholarly articles and sections of Miss D.'s unpublished memoir, *Minefields*. Its riches overwhelm, so take your time; linger over Dunham's 1963 assessments of "The Caribbean Islands Now and Then"; laugh aloud reading "The Anthropological Approach to the Dance" (1942) as she explains her early experiments in combining dance studies and academic theory; drool at the possibilities for study at the Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research, whose 1946-1947 brochure lists faculty including Marie Bryant (tap), Todd Bolender (ballet), Syvilla Fort (Dunham technique), José Limón (modern), and John Pratt (visual design) alongside offerings in languages, philosophy, cultural studies, and "deportment." At last month's "Boule Blanche," a party cum book launch organized by Dunham dancer Glory Van Scott and featuring performances by Charles Moore Dance Theatre, Dunham was radiant, surrounded by celebrants festooned in white. She reported feeling "relieved and released" that the volume exists. So should we all. T.F.D.