**Katherine Mary Dunham (b. 22 June 1909, Glen Ellyn, Illinois; d. 21 May 2006, New York, New York)**

**Summary**

As a choreographer, anthropologist, educator, and activist, Katherine Dunham transformed the field of dance in the twentieth century. In the mid-1930s she conducted anthropological research on dance and incorporated her findings into her choreography, blending the rhythms and movements of the Caribbean with ballet and modern dance. Through her dance troupe, which she formed in 1936, Dunham brought Africanist aesthetics to the concert dance stage and popularized the genre of African-American modern dance. For the next twenty-eight years, Dunham and her company of dancers, singers, and musicians toured the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia, exposing international audiences to a creative, modern interpretation of African diasporic culture. Through her school in New York, Dunham also established the Dunham Technique, which synthesized what she called primitive rhythms with ballet and modern dance. This technique became one of the foundations of modern and jazz dance in the postwar period. As an anthropologist, Dunham paid attention not only to how people danced, but why they did so. She disseminated her ideas on the social importance of dance through performance, publications, and education. Throughout her career Dunham used her public stature to fight for progressive social change, challenging segregation in the United States, discrimination in Brazil, and American foreign policy in Haiti.

**Training**

Dunham began her dance training in Chicago in 1930 with ballet dancer Mark Turbyfill while studying for her bachelor’s degree at the University of Chicago. Dunham and Turbyfill started a ballet school and company called Ballet Nègre. Within a year, however, a lack of students forced them to cease operations. Dunham then trained with Russian émigré Ludmila Speranzeva, a former dancer with La Chauve-Souris of Moscow. Speranzeva, who had also briefly been a student of Mary Wigman in Germany, encouraged Dunham to expand into modern dance and become more expressive in her performances. Through Speranzeva Dunham also met Vera Mirova, who taught Spanish, Balinese, and Russian folk dancing. In 1932, Dunham and Speranzeva started a company, which was heralded for its novelty in interpreting the black experience through modern dance. Dunham also danced with choreographer Ruth Page, who gave Dunham the lead role in the ballet *La Guiablesse* (1934) based on a Martinican folk tale, which Dunham performed to great critical acclaim at the Chicago Opera House.

Inspired by Page’s use of Martinican folklore and by anthropology professors at the University of Chicago, Dunham developed the idea of using ethnographic research to enrich her artistic performance. In 1934 she applied to the Rosenwald Foundation for a grant to study ballet at the School of American Ballet and modern dance at the Wigman School in New York (run by Hanya Holm), and what she called primitive dance in Egypt or Ethiopia. In her application, Dunham stated that while Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham had turned to the ancient Greeks and the Orient for inspiration, no choreographer had fully incorporated the rhythms of primitive peoples into modern dance. Primitive rhythms, she wrote, would reveal fundamental and universal principles of human movement that would give dance the injection it needed to remain vital, creative, and alive. The Rosenwald Foundation denied her funding request for further study in modern dance and ballet in New York, but approved her ethnographic fieldwork. Although Dunham wished to conduct the research in Africa, the Committee suggested she go to the Caribbean and required that she first study for six months with Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University.

On her ethnographic research trip from 1935 to 1936 Dunham learned the sacred and secular dances of Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Martinique. She documented both Africanist elements and the fusion of African, European, East Indian, and indigenous cultural forms. In particular, she noted that most movements initiated from the solar plexus and that Caribbean people often danced with polyrhythm—moving different parts of their bodies to different rhythmic speeds simultaneously. By approaching dance anthropologically, Dunham studied the role of dance in the larger social complex and developed a theory of the relationship between form and function: dance was not only an abstract aesthetic expression, but also served specific social functions. For example, social dances that emphasized the pelvic region released sexual tension and ritual funeral dances served as catharsis for grief. Dunham believed that understanding the purpose of dancing would enable her students and company members to become better performers, as they could properly communicate the emotions and intentions behind the movements to audiences.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

After returning from the Caribbean in 1936 Dunham put the goals stated in her Rosenwald application into practice and started her own dance company, known simply as Katherine Dunham and Her Group. In her first major work, *L’Ag’Ya* (1938), performed as part of Chicago’s Federal Theatre Project, Dunham synthesized ballet, modern dance, and Caribbean rhythms. The pas de deux section, partially captured on film in 1944, demonstrates Dunham’s new fusion aesthetic. While working on this ballet Dunham met the designer John Pratt, who would become her lifelong artistic collaborator and husband. Dunham once remarked that Pratt was fifty percent responsible for her success, as his vibrant costumes and sets transported audiences into the social worlds depicted onstage.

As a result of *L’Ag’Ya*’s positive reception, Louis Schaeffer of the Labor Stage invited Dunham to New York to create new numbers for the Broadway revue *Pins and Needles* (1939). Dunham used the theater during off hours to rehearse material for her own company. On 18 February 1940, “Katherine Dunham and Dance Group” gave a Sunday afternoon recital entitled *Tropics and Le Jazz ‘Hot’* at the Windsor Theatre. The show was so successful that it ran for several more weeks and catapulted Dunham into the limelight. Choreographer-director George Balanchine asked her to play the seductress Georgia Brown in the Broadway musical *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), for which Dunham also contributed choreography. From Broadway, Dunham went to California for two years, making movies such as *Carnival of Rhythm* (1941)*,* *Star-Spangled Rhythm* (1942), and *Stormy Weather* (1943).

Dunham reconfigured the performance of black modernity on these Broadway and Hollywood stages. *Stormy Weather* tells the history of twentieth-century African-American dance and theater through the story of Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson, starting with vaudeville and ending with a virtuosic tap dance number by the Nicholas Brothers. Dunham’s *Stormy Weather* ballet appears in a dream sequence, a break with the movie’s lineage of black performance. The ballet opened a new space of imaginative, creative possibility outside of the proscribed arenas of black dance. Her choreography combined balletic jumps, leg extensions, and lifts with pulsating torsos and undulating spines borrowed from her Caribbean material. As in *L’Ag’Ya*, in *Stormy Weather* Dunham rendered her dancing at the forefront of an artistic vanguard while pointing to a different aesthetic future than Martha Graham or Mary Wigman’s modern dance.

After her appearances in Hollywood, Dunham toured the United States under the impresario Sol Hurok. Her shows *Tropical Revue* (1943-1945), *Carib Song* (1945), and *Bal Nègre* (1946) showcased creative reinterpretations of sacred and social dances from the Caribbean, Latin America, Pacific Islands, and United States. Numbers such as *Rites de Passage*, based on what she called primitive ritual,””” showcased her dancers as distinctly modern beings and evoked a sense of modernity informed by a deeper connection to humanity’s primal needs. Paquita Anderson’s insistent, monotonous piano score, combined with Haitian drumming, evoked Igor Stravinsky’s score for *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913), and Dunham’s choreography of group ritual evoked Vaslav Nijinsky’s famed modernist ballet of the same name. Other numbers, such as *Batucada* and *Tropics—Shore Excursion*, entertained audiences with their depictions of African diasporic culture.

During this period Dunham became active in civil rights causes. In 1944 she gave a speech in Louisville, Kentucky in which she stated that she would not return to the city unless the theater was integrated. Dunham regularly battled segregated accommodations on tour, and at one point she sued the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago for racial discrimination. In addition to performing, Dunham opened the Katherine Dunham School of Dance in September 1945 in New York City. By offering classes in cultural anthropology, Spanish, French, philosophy, psychology, and other subjects, in addition to the standard dance and acting classes, the School invited performing artists to study not only technique, but also the wider cultural contexts for their art. The School had an interracial and international faculty and student body. Several aspects of the Dunham Technique taught at the school would become integral to both modern and jazz dance in America: isolations of the head, shoulders, torso, and hips, an increased freedom of movement of the pelvis and spine, and the concept of polyrhythm in the body. Dunham also continued publishing books and articles on Caribbean dance during the 1940s, strengthening the emerging field of dance anthropology.

In 1947 Dunham and her company left the United States to tour Mexico, then went to Europe, Latin America, Australia, and Asia. She did not return permanently to the United States for twenty years. As an unofficial cultural ambassador during the Cold War, Dunham brought a vision of Afro-modernity to international stages. She rarely chose to put an explicit social message onstage, but one major exception was *Southland*, which Dunham premiered on 9 December 1950 in Santiago, Chile. In the ballet, set in the American South, a white woman falsely accuses a black field hand of rape, leading to his lynching by an angry mob. State Department officials in Santiago, greatly upset by Dunham’s frank depiction of American racism during a tense Cold War moment, suppressed further publicity about the company in Chile and instructed U.S. embassies throughout Latin America to pressure Dunham not to perform the piece again.

Dunham dissolved the company due to financial reasons in 1960, though they performed twice more in New York in 1962 and 1964. In 1965 Dunham served as a Special Ambassador to the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, an experience that strengthened her cultural and political ties to Africa. She turned once again to education in 1967 when she founded the Performing Arts Training Center (P.A.T.C.) in East St. Louis, Illinois. Within a few years, the P.A.T.C. included a wide array of arts and humanities courses for college credit, an amateur dance company that performed throughout the Midwest, and a Dynamic Museum where visitors could touch and interact with objects that Dunham had collected on her international tours. Always committed to an international vision, Dunham fostered educational and cultural exchanges between the students in East St. Louis and artists from Senegal, Nigeria, Haiti, and Kenya. She continued to advocate for social justice, staging a hunger strike in 1992, at age eighty-two, to protest U.S. treatment of Haitian refugees.

**Legacy**

Dunham brought Africanist aesthetics to concert dance in America and created a new technique based on the fusion of ballet, Wigman-based modern dance, and Caribbean rhythms. Elements of the Dunham Technique can be seen in modern and jazz dance to this day. She inspired a generation of black dancers and choreographers including Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, and Janet Collins. By emphasizing the social importance of dance, Dunham offered a different perspective on the mythic abstraction that became popular among modern dance choreographers of the mid-twentieth century. Her anthropological research created a foundation for the field of dance ethnography and her political activism provided a powerful model for affecting social change through the performing arts.

**Joanna Dee Das**

**Select Concert Dance Works**

*Haitian Ceremonial Dances* (1937)

*L’Ag’Ya* (1938)

*Barrelhouse* (1938), originally called *Florida Swamp Shimmy* (1937)

*Le Jazz “Hot”* (1938), includes *Honky-Tonk*, *Boogie Woogie*, and *Barrelhouse*

*Rara Tonga* (1938), originally a part of *Primitive Rhythms* (1937)

*Bahiana* (1939), later called *Batucada* (1949)

*Tropics—Shore Excursion* (1939)

*Plantation Dances* (1940)

*Rites de Passage* (1941)

*Choro* (1944), later called *Choros* (1950), nos. 1-5

*Flaming Youth…1927* (1944)

*Shango* (1945)

*Blues* (1946), later called *Floyd’s Guitar Blues* (1955)

*Havana—1910* (1946)

*Nañigo* (1946)

*Tango* (1948) as part of *Jazz in Five Movements*; re-choreographed in 1951

*Veracruzana* (1948)

*Afrique* (1949)

*Southland* (1950)

*Ode to Taylor Jones* (1968)

**Select Broadway Shows**

*Pins and Needles* (1939)

*Tropics and Le Jazz “Hot”* (1940)

*Cabin in the Sky* (1940)

*Tropical Revue* (1943)

*Carib Song* (1945)

*Windy City* (1946)

*Bal Nègre* (1946)

*Caribbean Rhapsody* (1950)

*Bamboche!* (1962)

**Select Film Choreography**

*Carnival of Rhythm* (1941)

*Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942)

*Pardon My Sarong* (1942)

*Stormy Weather* (1943)

*Casbah* (1948)

*Mambo* (1954)

*Green Mansions* (1959)

*La Bibbia* (*The Bible*, 1966)

**Select Writings by Artist**

(1939) ‘L’ag’ya of Martinique’, (under the pseudonym Kaye Dunn), *Esquire* 12 (5): 84-85, 126.

(1941) ‘Thesis Turned Broadway’, *California Arts and Architecture* (August): 19.

(1946) *Katherine Dunham’s Journey to Accompong*, New York: Henry Holt.

(1959) *A Touch of Innocence: Memoirs of Childhood,* New York: Harcourt, Brace.

(1969) *Island Possessed*, New York: Doubleday.

**References and Further Reading**

Aschenbrenner, J. (2002) *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Clark, V. (1994) ‘Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-1987’, in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. G. Fabre and R. O'Meally, New York: Oxford University Press, 188-204.

Clark, V. A., and S. E. Johnson, eds. (2005) *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Das, J. D. (2014) ‘Choreographing a New World: Katherine Dunham and the Politics of Dance, 1928-1973’. PhD diss., Columbia University.

Manning, S. (2001) ‘Modern Dance, Negro Dance, and Katherine Dunham’, in *Textual Practice* 15 (3): 487-505.

Videos and Photographs from the Library of Congress will provide the most stable links, and will probably be easiest to gain copyright. The Missouri Historical Society also has a number of photographs that should be fairly easy to copyright.

**Moving Image Material**

*L’Ag’Ya* pas de deux: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003809/default.html>

*Barrelhouse*: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003811/default.html>

*Batucada*: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003808/default.html>

*Cakewalk* (part of the *Plantation Dances*): <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003812/default.html>

*Choros:* <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003837/default.html>

*Shango*: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003834/default.html>

Several film clips of Dunham Technique also on Library of Congress Website.

Additional *L’Ag’Ya* clips and ethnographic fieldwork clips also available.

**Paratextual Material**

Katherine Dunham and dance group in *Fantasie Nègre*, 1932.

Library of Congress, Music Division

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003738/enlarge.html?page=1&section>=

Labeled as 1936 on website, but from 1932

Katherine Dunham in a 1952 photograph of *Floyd’s Guitar Blues* (1946).

Library of Congress, Music Division

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003729/enlarge.html?page=1&section>=

Katherine Dunham in *Choros* (1944), n.d.

Library of Congress, Music Division

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200003753/enlarge.html?page=1&section>=

Katherine Dunham in *L’Ag’Ya* (1938), n.d.

Library of Congress, Music Division

<http://www.loc.gov/wiseguide/oct09/ballet.html>

Image on right.

Katherine Dunham in *L’Ag’Ya* (1938)

Missouri History Museum

<http://www.mohistory.org/node/250>

Katherine Dunham in the ‘Egyptian Dream Ballet’ in *Cabin in the Sky* on Broadway, 1940:

Morris Library, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University

<http://www.mohistory.org/KatherineDunham/popups/cabin.htm>