

The career of katherine dunham theatre essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Katherine Dunham modern dancer and choreographer, born in Glen Ellyn, Illinois United States of America, she were completed her study at the Chicago University and went on to earn a higher degree in anthropology. According to Darlene, (2006) turn to the side of dance she began her first school in Chicago in 1931, when she becoming dance director for the works progress administration's project of Chicago theatre. A flashy performer, she was best known for her choreography in such musicals as Cabin in the sky 1940, and for action pictures, notably Stormy Weather 1943. According to Barbara, (2000) Dunham studied about the dance forms in the Caribbean, especially Haiti where she lived for many years, and is credited with bringing Caribbean and African determines to a European dominated dance world. Her company traveled globally in the 1940s-60s, and she consistently denied performing at segregated venues. According to Joyce, (2002) in 1967 she founded the Performing Arts Training Center for inter-city younger in East St Louis, IL, and in 1992 went on a 47-day appetite strike to protestation in resistance to the American banishment of Haitian refugees. Her honours incorporated the Presidential Medal of the Arts (1989) and the Albert Schweitzer Prize.

Introduction

Dunham is perhaps most well known, however, for her unique blending of anthropology and dance. According to Jessie, (2002) Dunham challenged mainstream academic circles by using her anthropology not only for articles and books, but also as a catalyst for her own artistic dance productions, which heavily drew on the dance forms and cultural rituals she witnessed and documented through total immersion in the cultures she observed.

Dunham traveled the world with these productions, bringing African culture, through movements, rhythms and sounds, to the world's consciousness. This hybrid of anthropology and dance later morphed into what is today known as the Dunham technique, a special type of dance training utilizing movements witnessed in her field work. According to Darlene, (2006) Dunham technique is today studied and practiced around the world. After Dunham retired from dancing, she moved to East St. Louis, a blighted, predominantly African-American city which she hoped to revitalize through establishing a vibrant cultural center. Dunham established there an interactive museum and a dance institute (which continues to teach her technique to students from around the world).

Research objectives

Dunham desired to experiences this academy the base of enough larger cultural institution that world bring the East St. Louis community with each other. Just as surely as Haiti is overcome through the character of vaudun the island possessed African American Katherine Dunham when she first went there in the year of 1936 for the purpose of study dance and ritual. According to Joyce, (2002) in her book, Dunham discloses how her anthropological research, her work in dance, and her fascination for the people and cults of Haiti worked their trance, catapulting her into experiences that she was often lucky to have had. According to Richard and Joe, (2008) Dunham explain how the island came to be possessed by the deities of voodoo and other African religions, as well as by the deep class distributions, particularly within mulattos and blacks, and the political strife remain enough in evidence at present. Full of flare and suspense, Island

Possessed is also a pioneering work in the anthropology of dance and a captivating document on Haitian beliefs and politics.

Discussion

The book “ Island Possessed”, details Ms. Dunham’s experiences and sentiments of her adopted homeland, from the year 1936 to the late 1960s, and even describes her final initiation into the Vaudoun (Voodoo) religion of the half-island. According to Patrick, (2006) she speaks Haitian Creole fluently, she has owned a beautiful 18th century Haitian estate, “ Habitation LeClerc” for decades, and, in the early 1990s, she “ put her life on the line” and went on an extended hunger strike, when President Aristide was overthrown and forced to leave the country. According to Jane, (2007) Ms. Dunham also adopted a young girl from the French West Indies island of Martinique, back in the 1950s, as further demonstration of her love and commitment to the Diaspora.

Introduced to Theater

One of those baby-sitters, Clara Dunham, had come to Chicago with her daughter, Irene, hoping to break into show business. They and other amateur performers began rehearsing a musical/theatrical program in the basement of their apartment building, and Dunham would watch. Although the program wasn’t a success, it provided Dunham with her first taste of show business. According to Darlene, (2006) Dunham and her brother were very fond of their Aunt Lulu. However, because she was experiencing financial difficulties, a judge granted temporary custody of the children to

their half-sister Fanny June Weir, and ordered that the children be returned to their father as soon as he could prove that he could take care of them.

Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham was born June 22, 1909, in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, in DuPage County, and died May 21, 2006 in New York City. Although one of the most important artists (and scholars) of her time, she remains largely unknown outside Dance and African-American studies. According to Darlene, (2006) Sara E. Johnson supposed that the breadth of Dunham's accomplishments is perhaps one explanation for the underappreciation of her work. Dunham worked so hard on so many different things that she remains hard to classify. She almost single-handedly created a genuine artistic and cultural appreciation for the unique aspects of African dance, especially as manifested in African diaspora cultures. According to Joyce, (2002) Dunham was also a serious anthropologist that began her career with ground-breaking studies carried out in Jamaica and Haiti as a student at the University of Chicago. Finally, she was a tireless advocate, who led to a brief arrest during race riots in East St. Louis and a 47 day hunger-strike carried out at the age of 82 against US discrimination against Haitian refugees.

Dunham's Artistic & Academic Background

This process was, in fact, a remaking of memory through performance. As Hamera reinforces, the practice of the social work of aesthetics is especially communal and corporeal, and where corporeality and sociality are remade as surely as formal event is produced. According to Jessie, (2002) in this sense, Afro-Caribbean culture and "sociality" voyaged across the Atlantic to

the rest of the Americas, Europe, and Asian-whenever the Katherine Dunham Dance Company performed. According to Ruth, (2009) Dunham's Research-to-Performance Method Armed with these researched dances of the black Atlantic and an understanding of their Functional social contexts, Dunham's dance theater became a prime laboratory where Afro- Caribbean cultures could " migrate" through the performance of her choreography and through the personalities of her individual dancers in the act of performing the Dunham oeuvre.

Uncovering Danced Memory

Katherine Dunham's earliest written ethnography provides ample proof of her prescience as a fieldworker and scholar in uncovering an ancient African dance surviving in the Caribbean on the island of Jamaica. According to Joyce, (2002) in her fieldwork represented in *Journey to Accompong*, she utilized a functionalist theoretical frame by recording the various social institutions in relationship to each other in the village of Accompong. Kinship, ownership patterns, religion, work group organizations, clothing and material culture, age, gender (unusual for her time), and social interaction were the sequential subject matters of her chapters. Yet, as she reveals, she had come there " to study and take part in the dances." According to Naima, (2001) Accompong was and is one of the maroon villages in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, having been established by run-a-away slaves from the Spanish as early as 1650 and later the English rulers in the 1690s of these maroons the Coromantees, an Akan group from the West African Gold Coast made up the largest ethnic group. They fought many battles with the British and were finally given their independence by England in a treaty

signed in 1738. Thus, as a nation within a nation, the maroons of the cockpit region of the Blue Mountains had sufficiently maintained their ways of life for two centuries by the time that Katherine Dunham had arrived to study their dances and ways of life.

Enslavement and colonialism had taken its toll even among those so long separated from European influence. But Dunham was determined to unearth a vital expressive part of their successful victory and independence against the British. She would soon discover this same phenomenon among the petwo dances among the Vodou practitioners in Haiti against their French captors. Through her intense engagement of the participatory insider role with the dancing maroons, she gained historical insights that were embedded within the dancing act itself: According to Richard and Joe, (2008) The war dances are danced by men and women. Their songs are in lusty Koromantee, and from somewhere a woman has procured a rattle and shakes this in accompaniment to Ba' Weeyums. Some of the men wave sticks in the air, and the women tear off their handkerchiefs and wave them on high as they dance. According to Patrick, (2006) few of these turns, and we are separated in a melee of leaping, shouting warriors; a moment later we are " bush fighting," crouching down and advancing in line to attack an imaginary enemy with many feints, swerves and much pantomime. At one stage of the dance Miss Ma'y and I are face to face, she no longer is a duppy, but a maroon woman of old days, working the men up to a pitch where they will descend into the cockpit and exterminate one of his majesty's red-coated platoons.

Afro -Jamaican dances, such as the Coromantee war dance, represent in a direct way the concept of dance itself as having rhetorical voice. As Judith Hamera explains, performance, including dance, is enmeshed in language, in reading, writing, rhetoric, and in voice. Dunham implicitly understood the movement rhetoric of the Coromantee dance and the relationship between its performance and the writing of her ethnographic experience in Jamaica. According to Richard and Joe, (2008) Dunham's willingness to engage the maroon dances on the culture's own terms, treating dance as another social system, allowed her a unique view into the role of the nearly forgotten Koromantee dance as a part of the maroons' hard won battle for independence from the British. According to Joyce, (2002) this is a prime example of dance's unique rhetorical voice-what dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel calls embodied knowledge: Community members are in an open classroom with dance and music behavior.

These sorts of ' knowledges' are on display as community instruction for social cohesion and cosmic balance, Participants learn from observation, witnessing, modeling and active participation. According to Ira and Faye, (2009) Dunham's implicit understanding of this embodied knowledge established her philosophical foundation that would serve her use of dance and the body, according to Clark, as a " repository of memory." Moreover, she trusted her choreographic acumen to represent her understanding of her research, which in the Jamaican case, had been unearthed and cajoled from the continuing, yet reluctant, milieux de mémoire lingering in Accompong.

According to Richard and Joe, (2008) in her active participation, Dunham was, thus, one of the first to demonstrate the continuity of specific West

African dances that served enslaved Africans with similar purposes in the colonial New World. It is significant that this discovery was cognized in the act of dancing, through corporeal immersion in the communal dances of the people. We realize from today's contemporary scholarship the importance of Dunham's early trans-Atlantic performance connections. According to Joyce, (2002) Africanist anthropologist Margaret Drewal revealed in the 1990s that African-based performance. Primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed. As I have said elsewhere, dance, for African peoples, whether on the continent or in the diaspora, is a means of enacting immediate social context, history, and indeed philosophical worldview. Dunham understood these multiple strategies embedded within Africanist performance, such as in her treasured Koromantee war dance.

Honouring Katherine Dunham as the progenitor of African American dance would be misleading and disrespect the legacy of other African Americans who contributed their own particular ways of knowing movement. According to Jane, (2007) it introduced Bannerman to Pearl Primus. Both Dunham and Primus were pioneering giants in the American dance pantheon with different ways of making dance. Since the programme was ultimately going to comment on the dance practices of African Americans, these two pioneers had to be discussed. According to Ruth, (2009) collecting life stories and reflections on movement and descriptions of individual interactions with works of Dunham and Primus would speak of the diversity that is American dance making than the celebration of any one artist.

Dunham's Staged Caribbean Dances of the Black Atlantic

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Dunham perceived her form of dance-theater as intercultural communication. For example, when international audiences viewed her 1948 ballet *Naningo*, she was allowing non-Cubans to interact with one of the ritualized ways in which male Afro-Cubans had retained their cosmological secret rituals perpetuated from the Ejagham people of today's Cross-River area of Nigeria. According to Jessie, (2002) *Naningo*, as an all-male ballet was a fusion of balletic athleticism, Dunham technique (particularly rhythmic torso isolations and the use of the pelvis as the source for extending the legs), and a recontextualization of the movements of the Cuban male secret society called Abakua. Through program notes, the exuberant virtuosity of the dance, and the cryptic Abakua symbolic movements, she transported European audiences to secret enclaves in Cuba that only initiated Abakua members could have previously viewed.

She also cast one of her Cuban dancers in the role of a traditional Abakua figure that drums upstage center throughout the entire ballet, as an “authentic” gaze watching over her appropriated fusion style. According to Barbara, (2000) as the curtain closes, after all the Dunham technique dancers have left, the ballet ends with that figure moving across the stage in enigmatic movement phrases representative of the symbolic language of the Abakua Cuban male society. Secret society rituals, restaged in a secular theatrical setting is not a substitute for “being there,” but it does transmit an underlying social strategy of male survivors of the Atlantic slave trade, as well as a vision of sacred danced symbolism in that survival strategy.

According to Ruth, (2009) Dunham company performed *Naningo* for people internationally who had no idea that the Abakua society even existed. In the

adept hands of knowledgeable researchers like Katherine Dunham, performance becomes another mode of bridging the cultural gaps that make cross-cultural understanding such a difficult goal to reach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, life of the Dunham and career are miraculous, and although she was not alone, Dunham is perhaps the best known and most influential pioneer of black dance. She wanted to make a point that African-American and African-Caribbean styles are related and powerful components of dance in America. Performed imagined migration is underpinned by her specific artistic intent and projected audience reception. There are many ways to present dance on radio but a visual image is preferable if the discussion concerns elements of a form. The programme makers can then include descriptions of how the shaping of arms and legs display rhythm or portray expression and how contours of the torso fulfill the dancer's intended personification. Radio though is an excellent tool to stir the mind's eye especially if the words relate life stories and movement experiences in a descriptive way. Bannerman contacted me to research and be the presenter for the 45-minute programme "You Dance Because You Have To" aired on 21 September 2003. Interested in emerging American dance forms producer, Richard Bannerman submitted a proposal to BBC Radio 3 to make a documentary on Katherine Dunham. Bannerman knew Radio 3 wanted to explore new territories in dance and Katherine Dunham's story was relatively unknown in Britain. Bannerman also found the repertory of The Alvin Ailey Dance Company inspiring and speculated that Katherine Dunham's life would be a good starting point to discuss in a general way, the dance practices of

African Americans. In our preliminary meeting it became clear to me that our programme had to respect the diversity of African American practices.