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KATHERINE DUNHAM (1909–2006)

WHAT a life! Katherine Dunham was a formidable dancer, an irrepressible choreographer, a driven social activist, a groundbreaking ethnologist and anthropologist, a serial autobiographer, an international star, an inspiration, a scandal (banned in Boston!), and a model for generations of African American performers. It's surprising that she found time to die, even if it was at the age of ninety-six. She starred as Georgia Brown in George Balanchine's Broadway musical *Cabin in the Sky*, the show that Ethel Waters stopped with "Taking a Chance on Love." (Lena Horne played Georgia in the movie.) She went on a forty-seven-day hunger strike to protest American policies toward Haitian refugees. (Speaking of Haiti, she became a priestess of the Vaudon religion there.) She choreographed a new production of *Aïda* at the Met, featuring Leontyne Price. For decades, she toured the world with her Katherine Dunham Dance Company, mostly performing revues she created with names like *Bal Nègre* and *Caribbean Rhapsody*. (Dancers affiliated with Dunham's company include Eartha Kitt, Janet Collins, and Talley Beatty.) She married the artist and scenic designer John Pratt, her collaborator on her shows as well, and they adopted a French baby. Occasionally she approached bankruptcy, though she hardly noticed. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of the Arts and received the Kennedy Honors. "Judging from reactions," she said, "the dancing in my group is called anthropology in New Haven, sex in Boston, and in Rome—art!"

Thesis Turned Broadway

IN THE great raft of publicity which, in the past few months, has appeared in connection with my role in the Broadway show *Cabin in the Sky*, I find myself referred to, and on the very same day, both as

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“the hottest thing on Broadway” and “an intelligent, sensitive young woman . . . an anthropologist of note.” Personally, I do not think of myself as either one of these extreme phenomena. But eager reporters, confronted by the simultaneous presence of two such diverse elements, have often failed to grasp the synthesis between them; they have chosen, instead, to account for effectiveness by an exaggerated emphasis upon either one or the other. Then there is always the fact that the attempt to relate the dignified and somewhat awesome science of anthropology with the popular art of Broadway dancing and theater works the interviewer back to the question of which came first. Actually, that consideration is as unimportant as the chicken-egg controversy. Now that I look back over the long period of sometimes alternating, sometimes simultaneous interest in both subjects, it seems inevitable that they should have eventually fused completely.

Every person who has a germ of artistry seeks to recreate and present an impression of universal human experience—to fulfill either human needs or wants. The instrument is the specific art form which may have been chosen; the effectiveness depends upon skill in handling the form and upon the originality of the individual imagination. But the experience which is given expression cannot be either too individual or too specific; it must be universal. In the Greek theater, for example, the importance of the universals was so great that an entire system of formal absolutes was worked out of their expression. Consequently, any effective artistic communication is impossible if the artist’s understanding of human experience is limited by inadequate knowledge. Anthropology is the study of man. It is a study not of a prescribed portion of man’s activity or history, but a study (through some one of the five fields of anthropological specialization—ethnology, archaeology, social anthropology, linguistics, physical anthropology) of his entire state of being throughout his entire history. In such a survey, the student of anthropology gradually comes to recognize universal emotional experiences, common alike to both the primitive Bushman and the sophisticated cosmopolitan; he notes patterns of expression which have been repeatedly effective throughout the ages and which, though modified by many material circumstances, persist in their essential form; and finally, he acquires an historical perspective which enables him, in the confusion of changing maps and

two world wars within a single generation, to discern the developing motifs and consistent trends.

As nearly as I can remember, I have been dancing since I was eight years old and it has been my growing interest to know not only how people dance but, even more importantly, why they dance as they do. By the time I was studying at the University of Chicago, I had come to feel that if I could discover this, not only as it applied to one group of people but to diverse groups, with their diverse cultural, psychological, and racial backgrounds, I would have arrived at some of the fundamentals, not only of choreographic technique, but of theater artistry and function. I applied myself to acquiring this knowledge and eventually, as a "Julius Rosenwald fellow, student of anthropology and the dance," spent a year and a half traveling through the West Indies in pursuit of this understanding.

In the beginning, I had great hopes of turning out a thesis for the University of Chicago which would take care of the entire field of primitive dance. It was to be entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Primitive Dance." I ended up by limiting my thesis to "A Comparative Analysis of the Dances of Haiti: Their Form, Function, Social Organization, and the Interrelation of Form and Function." (Still too much for one sitting!) In the West Indies the peasant natives (primarily Negroes of Koromantee, Ibo, Congo, Dahomey, Mandingo, and other west coast derivation, mixed perhaps with a little Carib Indian and varying degrees of European stock) think very much and behave basically very much as did their African forebears. Consequently they dance very much in the same fashion. Differences there are, of course, due to the shift from tribal to folk culture, to miscegenation, cultural contact, and other items making for social change. But the elements of the dance are still what, in my analysis, would be termed "primitive." Almost all social activity is dancing or some type of rhythmic motion (it may be the unified movement of the *combite* or work society of Haiti in cutting sugar cane, or a similar activity in the work societies of the Jamaican Maroons, or the cross-country trek of a Carnival band). Out of a maze of material from the concentrated fields of study—Jamaica, Haiti, Martinique, and Trinidad—one important fact stood out: in these societies the theater of the people ("theater" being practically synonymous with dance activity) served a well-integrated, well-defined function in the community; in the case of the Carnival

dances of social integration and sexual stimulus and release; in the funeral dance the externalization of grief; the social dances, exhibitionism and sexual selection along with social cohesion; in the ceremonial dances, group “ethos” solidarity in an established mechanism of worship, whether through hypnosis, hysteria, or ecstasy. And so on through the several categories of dances arrived at.

It was one thing to write a thesis and have it approved for a master’s degree. It was another thing to begin earning a living on Broadway. In making use of field training to choreograph for my group, I found persistently recurring in the back of my mind, in some form or another, “function.” It never seemed important to portray, as such, the behavior of other peoples as exotics. But the cultural and psychological framework, the “why” became increasingly important. It became a matter of course to attack a stage or production situation in the same way in which I would approach a new primitive community or work to analyze a dance category. As in the primitive community certain movement patterns, which I cannot go into here, were always related to certain functions, so in the modern theater there would be a correlation between a dance movement and the function of that dance within the theater framework. And certainly a broad and general knowledge of cultures and cultural patterns can be advantageously brought to bear upon the problems of relating form and function in the modern theater. Or so has been my theory and so my practice in my own theater experience.

What would be the connection between the Carnival dance, whose function is sexual stimulus and release, and almost any similar situation in a Broadway musical—for example, the temptation scene on the River Nile in *Cabin in the Sky*? It would be the similarity in function, and through this similarity in function the transference of certain elements of form would be legitimate.

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