

Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham, (1909–2006) was a dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, author, educator, and activist. Dunham was a dance pioneer in America and internationally and was often called the "matriarch of black dance." Her eponymous dance company traveled to over 47 countries and almost every continent and was the only financially independent black dance company during its three-decade tenure.

During the 30's and 40's, Dunham was well known on the Hollywood screen and Broadway stage, but it was through her formal training as an anthropologist that she made her greatest cultural contributions. Dunham's ethnographic fieldwork in Jamaica, Haiti, and across the Caribbean was concerned with the religious and social dance of the African Diaspora. Best remembered for developing the Dunham Dance Technique, she blended African-Caribbean dance with classical ballet and modern dance techniques, lifting up a diasporic approach to dance and casting personal and communal forms of dance in a new light. Dunham was in the vanguard of developing the field of dance anthropology or ethnochoreology and opened up the often rigid field for black dancers and dance-makers who followed.

Her father, Albert Millard Dunham, was a descendant of people from West Africa and Madagascar. Her mother, Fanny June Dunham, was of mixed French-Canadian American and Native American heritage. In her book, *A Touch of Innocence*, she details about her painful childhood after the death of her mother when she was four years old. Katherine Dunham would later join her brother Albert, Jr., who was studying philosophy at the University of Chicago. She studied ballet with Ludmilla Speranzeva, a Russian ballerina and is known for her role in Ruth Page's, *La Guisabes* ("The Devil Woman"). In 1931, Dunham formed one of the first Black ballet companies called Ballets Nègre.

In 1935, Dunham was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship to explore dances of the Caribbean and Latin America. This led her to Jamaica, Martinique, and she especially loved Haitian Folklore dance. Dunham's mentors were Erich Fromm and Melville Herskovits of Northwestern University, who had researched the Maroons of Jamaica. Dunham wanted to stay among the people. This led to her research which she details in the book, *Journey to Accompong*. She researched Shango, the Yoruba Orisha who maintained importance throughout the African diaspora. Dunham fell in love with the people of Haiti and Vodun culture. She wrote, *Dances of Haiti*, to document her research and these dances became an integral part of the Dunham Technique.

She choreographed *Aida* and was the first Black woman to choreograph for the Metropolitan Opera and featured Janet Collins who was the first Black prima ballerina to perform there. In 1972 Dunham choreographed Scott Joplin's, *Treemonisha* at Wolf Trap. Dunham choreographed her own role as Georgia Brown, in "Cabin in the Sky."

Katherine Dunham also appeared in several films: *Casbah*, debuting Eartha Kitt (1948), Her signature dances are, *Stormy Weather*, *Rites de Passage*, and *Southland* that depicts a white woman falsely accusing a black man of assault and he is then lynched. The *Stormy Weather*, dance in the film was phenomenal because of the ethereal staging of the dance. It goes from on the street in jazzy clothes to flowing, lyrical movements of dancers in the clouds as the storm itself. Dunham refused to honor Hollywood's request to get rid of her dark-skinned dancers. Dunham refused to perform in a Louisville, Kentucky, segregated theater she said, "until people who look like me could sit next to people who look like you," the company would not return. She made national and international headlines at age of 82, by going on a hunger strike of 47 days in 1993 to protest the U.S. government's repatriation policy for Haitian immigrants. Many celebrities joined her to raise public awareness of the treatment of Black Haitian refugees. In 1950, Dunham was denied a room at the Hotel Esplanada adjoining the São Paulo Municipal Theater where she was to perform. She was not allowed to join her husband who was white. A year later the Afonso Arinos law was passed, barring racial discrimination in public sector employment and public accommodations.