

KATHERINE DUNHAM

Cultural anthropologist, dancer and choreographer, singer, actress, founder of dance companies and inner-city learning centers, author, and professor -- Katherine Dunham has contributed uniquely and with great influence to the performance of dance and to our understanding of its cultural origins in the twentieth century. Born and reared around Chicago, she overcame the poverty and racial stereotypes of her youth to organize, even in her teens, schools of dance in Chicago. Finding the origins of popular dances in African tribal dances, she pursued her interests in anthropology, the discipline that she would claim as her specialty as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago.

Her study and performance of dance in America convinced her of the need to investigate West Indian and African dances in their original and native environments. During a visit of fifteen months to Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad, she was invited by local religious groups in the remote areas of these countries to join with them in their native dances and thereby to study their performance with precision and detail. In the years to follow, similar anthropological explorations were undertaken in Europe, Mexico, South America, Australia, Japan, and Africa itself. These visits became the models for her own performing companies as well as her scholarly research.

Launching a long career of performances throughout the world, she often danced, sang, and directed choreography. She worked steadily with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League to bring about the racial integration of her American audiences and has described these efforts as among her company's most important achievements.

In the 1940s, at the invitation of the President of Haiti, she brought her troupe to that country for performances and training of local dancers, just as in the 1960s she accepted a similar invitation from the President of the African country of Senegal to help train the Senegalese National Ballet. She returned from Dakar to establish the Katherine Dunham Performing Arts Training Center in East Saint Louis, a dance school for young victims of inner-city poverty. She introduced into the curriculum the study of psychology, anthropology, and languages, as well as dance and theater. Today, that program continues in the Katherine Dunham Children's Workshop and Museum in East Saint Louis. She also helped to found dance schools in Chicago, New York, Haiti, Stockholm, Paris, and in Italy.

Author of two autobiographical volumes, a book on Haiti and its people, and numerous other essays, she determined that the cultural roots of African-American dance embraced but also transcended a limited cultural expression: "I do not admit to a spiritual or cultural poverty in Black people," she has written, "which would make it necessary to coin a word or system of thinking of oneself outside the human division." For her enrichment of that human division, this University confers with great satisfaction this honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts upon Katherine Dunham.