

**Excerpts From Dorothy Demby's Audio-Taped  
Interview of Katherine Dunham with an  
Excerpt of John Pratt's Interview**

In Their Home at the Résidence Leclerc  
in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, January 1981

K. DUNHAM: I am not a person who deals in time sequentially. Sometimes I am forced to think of it that way, but it's not my nature. I remember once writing to Bernard Berenson "Time is a round thing" and that is apparently the way I look at time, life, and everything else that is circular and not linear. Sometimes I see things happening and I have that sense of déjà-vu. Very often things have happened to me and I feel that I have already lived them or seen them or something like that. Going on in daily living, I have learned to take little, small pieces, I'd say a centimeter at a time, just a few moments at a time, and let that be what is important, instead of long drawn out in years. I think that attitude about time is a good one.

D. DEMBY: Would that cover the point that you made before on seeing the various sides of you?

K. DUNHAM: Probably. It probably would. In thinking of myself, I was interested in the split-personality from a few years ago. Then I think it was John Martin in the New York Times who once said, "This is a multiple personality, not a split one." I began to think about it then and I saw that it was true because I love to dance, but to dance in the way I think of dance, as rhythmic motion and for a number of various reasons. I have always shied away from the formalities of a technique because I didn't want to be influenced in developing my own technique. I am particularly interested in sources, and sometimes going to a source will lead me off onto several different interpretations of it, several different styles.

D. DEMBY: As a choreographer did you sit down and think through, as one would do in writing choreography, or did you do it as you were moving around?

K. DUNHAM: Sometimes, day and night, I would be working out the choreography. I still do that. But sometimes I would just work it out in my mind, and then the next day put some of it into practice in a rehearsal.

When a rehearsal would be going on well, I would then begin to build in things that I hadn't seen before, so that it was a constant matter of creating like, I suppose, a sculptor molding his material. I seldom finished anything without working it out with the Company.

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D. DEMBY: What about your painting? Where did you do most of your painting?

K. DUNHAM: That's another one of those personalities... In 1948 we were in Paris, and Paris after London was just miserable for me. I've never liked a lot of publicity and our manager said, "You just have to accept it. You've been a great success and you have to rise to it." But when we found photographers hiding under the dressing tables in the girls dressing rooms, I said this is too much, and I moved from the center of Paris to Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which is about, oh... 20 kilometers out of Paris on the river Seine.

The hotel was the Pavillon Henri IV and it was supposedly where the king had lived for a while or had his country place for a while, or something. A beautiful forest, a beautiful park, and the hotel itself was furnished in style Henri IV, yet it was still modern. Sometimes after the show I would go to the Hotel de Crillon on Place de la Concorde and... I have forgotten the question.

D. DEMBY: It was about your paintings.

K. DUNHAM: Painting, yes. So one morning I was in the Pavillon at St. Germain-en-Laye, and I looked out of the window and across the river I saw a scene that fascinated me. It was almost like Utrillo; it was rooftops and streets and to one side a small cemetery. There it was just by itself in a rather misty fog. I said to my husband, "I wish I had a camera. I would like to capture that picture." He said, "Why

don't you just paint it." I said, "It never occurred to me that I'd paint." He said, "Well why can't you? Just put down what you see."

He immediately went to town and bought a basic palette for me, some paint, an easel and some canvases, and I started to paint. And I was shocked. I really was shocked. I was taken aback by it. Because actually what I saw, the way I saw the scene in front of me, is what I put on canvas. And from then on there was no stopping me.

D. DEMBY: Just for the pleasure of painting?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I was painting for myself and naturally I hung some of the pictures when they were still wet. I'll never forget a lady who had a lot of feathers in her hat and some of them stuck to one of the paintings. I don't remember what the newspapers said, frankly. I'm, not even sure that they were real reviews. They were nonsense. But that experience, and thinking over what a critic had said didn't stop me from painting.

D. DEMBY: Could you call it a successful showing?

K. DUNHAM: I don't know. There were a lot of people there but I learned before long that people would come to these showings of mine, to see me and to meet me because that was the only way they could do it. After that, I went on to another showing of mine in Milano and the first painting that was ever sold was bought by Porfirio Rubirosa. He came with Doris Duke and he bought a painting.

D. DEMBY: Do you remember the title of this painting?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, 'Anne Nude'. It was the back view of Anna Grayson who was lying on a sofa with the view of Saint Germain-en-Laye and the river as background. I started a painting before I came to Haiti, this time of my daughter Marie-Christine. I am not satisfied with it. I don't know if I'll ever finish it.

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D. DEMBY: As you moved along, there was another definition of your dance career and I was wondering if you would explain that. I suppose it was more related to your choreography: a fundamental period, a lyrical period and a Karate period.

K. DUNHAM: The fundamental period. I must have been thinking about a period where the primitive rhythms in dance were the basis, I would say. Before the West Indies, I had some work in Spanish dancing and some in East Indian dancing, and I probably meant primitive or folk dances as being one phase. I often felt too limited by the use of primitive material which I felt that I needed. I imagine I was to some degree influenced by people like Herald Kreutzberg and Mary Wigman. It must have just been a need of mine not to be hemmed in by only the rhythms and the primitive.

D. DEMBY: What dances, what presentations came under that period, for example? The lyrical period, that was the second period.

K. DUNHAM: I went through a period at one time of... well, I had a great interest in Waltzes and of teaching, especially children, certain combinations and figures to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, to waltz time. One would almost think that it was just a direct breakaway from the use of percussion only, percussion and voice. But there were parts of *L'Ag'ya* that were very lyrical.

D. DEMBY: Throughout your whole period of dancing, developing the technique and choreographing, was there a common denominator, a key element? I was thinking of instruments.

K. DUNHAM: I'd say rhythm was a key element. That would come first with me whether it was in class work or in a full ballet or in a created number. I was influenced first by Cuban, Haitian and Brazilian rhythms. African rhythms came later. I also depended heavily on the guitar. Even in an orchestration of a half dozen people, I would always hope to have a guitar involved. I've always depended on that. In some of our bigger orchestrations I've turned toward, as the need would present itself, a French horn. And I like the oboe for certain coloring and mood. Our orchestrations were, many times, as important as the rest of the performance. They were

quite wonderful and I made great use of these instruments that are associated with concert music and symphonies.

D. DEMBY: How do you feel about the climate for dancers today?

K. DUNHAM: I think that it is very hard for dancers today. The National Endowment for the Arts has been a great help, in terms of small companies in out of the way places, and Midwestern small towns, and so forth. I think a lot has been done in terms of bringing dance out of its completely obscure position, chiefly in the middle part of the country. But I don't feel too optimistic about what might be the next question, which would be about Black Dance. I think that it's fantastic that Alvin Ailey has his studio, his center and his company. But, that just isn't enough. It has to be made easier, I think, for dancers all over the country, and for black dancers even more: more scholarships, a more critical approach to what they are learning, and the opportunity to perform. So I would say that I'm not terribly excited about the position of dancers today.

D. DEMBY: Well, what do you think is behind the problem that does still exist? Do you think it's still a racial problem, do you think it's pure economics, do you think it's what a country sees as important, or what?

K. DUNHAM: What a country sees as important, certainly. I think that's part of it. And then that the development of anything, let's say a minority group into expositions of either intellect or beauty, is often resented by people who are in control. And I think that the first reaction to, we'll say, an unknown beautiful ballet company coming in from a minority group, the first reaction is, oh wonderful. And then after that, it's to work at, in a way, pulling it down, destroying it, helping to see that it doesn't move ahead. I think that's just true in human beings in general. And certainly there's wonderful opportunity in this country to see that, how the minority companies don't develop and produce as much as they could. I think it's a matter of, it's a kind of protection of the race jealousy. You can look at it that way. But I think that in the same way, many of our young writers and scholars who could be academicians, don't have the opportunity. You know, there's nothing wrong with Afro-American

programs, but there just has to be other places to go. Without being, what I have always called, and so has my husband from his experiences in Guinea, a polka-dot, you know.

I think that the doors, the opening gates are not as wide as they should be. And I wouldn't be surprised if they weren't closing. There was a great deal of hope at one time, and I think that time was the time of the militant action. But I don't see as many books being published by black people as I would like to, for instance. I don't think this is accidental. And I think, Black or Third World countries could have centers for cultural arts and sciences, perhaps. I would like very much to take part in something like that and be able to contribute what we have in all our archives and museums, for instance. It always puzzled me when I was a student in anthropology, the question of why more anthropologists were not dancing, or why dance as a cultural trait was not examined thoroughly in anthropology. Of course there had been Franz Boas, who wrote about the American Indians... (tape inaudible) ...but never seemed to me to really fulfill the needs of a layman. I would find myself, as a dancer, able to follow certain things and visualize others, but I imagine that a layman would have a pretty hard time being able to know what a dance looked like, without the use of film for instance. The ritual meaning or social meaning of the dance could certainly be told by any of the anthropologists that were interested in that particular trait.

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D. DEMBY: Were there other of your outstanding educational lectures that you wanted to mention at this particular time? There are so many of them.

K. DUNHAM: Well, I think that one of the most satisfying talks that I gave was when I received an honorary degree from McMurray College in Jacksonville. My topic was survival. I was interested in how man can survive. I wasn't thinking then of material survival. You know, it was sort of interesting to me, the night before I left to do the lecture, a couple of the brothers came by. I was busy working, I said, "I'd like for you to hear something." And I read the lecture to

them. And the first answer from one of them was, “Well, you know, I don’t see what that has to do” ..., he was a young one, “I don’t see what that has to do with just getting enough bread and meat and pay the rent.” Of course I could see that too, but I wanted to talk to these graduating college students about their responsibility to themselves, to the education they already had, and to the world, in terms of how to survive a crisis that you are daily confronting. In other words, I think it was one of my attempts at a total lecture on humanism, and what it would mean to them in later life, if they were able to think of survival in these terms.

D. DEMBY: Yes, this is a point of view that you have carried through in all of your activities and interests in human beings.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I think so. And I spoke of practical things, of the use they should make of nature and the atmosphere, and the sun and so forth. And then I spoke about their understanding of life, and life survival, without preoccupation with death. And I don’t quite remember the lecture but it was a very satisfactory one, and they were apparently very pleased. It was a graduating class of students getting their bachelor’s degrees in a number of disciplines.

D. DEMBY: One of the papers that you had written was on anthropology. You presented it in one of the Scandinavian countries, I do not remember the title of it.

K. DUNHAM: I’ve done a number of conferences for various cultural groups and I remember, I think it was the London Society of Anthropology. I did a paper on cults among deprived people. And then I remember the Royal Society in Belgium, where I did the same paper. I used to lecture a great deal, chiefly lecture-demonstrations. I liked to show the Company, and where and what they evolved from, and how the technique evolved from its more primitive origins. This sort of thing I remember I also did in New Zealand and Australia.

When I got back to the United States, in this whole militant period, I was called on to talk at so many conferences, and so many Third World groups; and so many people were trying so hard to do good, and thought maybe they’d find answers in people such as I who had

travelled a lot. And I became exhausted with what I felt was the kind of repetition of my life. How we had in effect left the country, America, because of its great problem to us, as a performing unit.

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D. DEMBY: I know that perhaps at the time, you had a lot of young people in your Company. In addition to being the director of the Company and the choreographer and so forth, I'm sure that you had to be the social worker, with the many personal problems.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, the social worker and the psychoanalyst. I remember I tried various means of capturing their attention, and making out of the Company a humanitarian group that danced. I once had a doctor in Italy who had spent a lot of time in China and seemed to be concerned about the fact that the problems with my knees may be psychosomatic, because he was aware of the pressures of the Company. Some of my great pressures were not always financial, although they were always present, but some of the pressures were caused by temperaments, and so forth and so on. And he said, "As I listen to you the only thing I think will satisfy you, would be to have a couple of people who thought as you do, who could be trained as humanists, and then train them as dancers."

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D. DEMBY: Do you feel that Dance Anthropology, as a study, is any more helpful or has done any more for so many of the minority students who have come to your school without necessarily having a cultural background? Do you think it has done any more for them that it would for some of the others?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I certainly do. I think that the idea of bringing academia into the performing arts, is an important thing in itself. But I think also that many students of dance are not totally satisfied with simply the movements themselves. They want to know more about it. And certainly the students of so-called 'ethnic dance' have to have this background. I've never liked the term ethnic dance, but I haven't found anything better, so I let that go by. But I think that it's

extremely necessary for people who are interested in dance from this point of view.

D. DEMBY: When you say ethnic dance, of course, I immediately think in terms of black ethnic, but there are other ethnic groups. And would you say the study of these anthropological aspects behind other groups would be equally as important?

K. DUNHAM: Oh yes, I wouldn't confine it to black. I am overall opposed to confining any kind of academic study, or scientific study, to only black. I think of myself now, even with my work in East St. Louis, as belonging to a kind of third world complex. But if you leave black Africa, and you go into North Africa, into the Far East, or India, anywhere, as far as the Eskimos, you will find something to be learned in terms of Dance Anthropology, as to why they dance the way they do, when they do, who does the dancing, what they derive from it as a unit, what they derive from it as an individual, and so forth. This is all the vast study of this kind of social trait, of rhythmic motion.

And dance as a catharsis is known the world over. I think it operates in situations such as deprivation, malnutrition, stress and so forth; and dance in churches, and religious ceremonies, and ecstasies, and gatherings of people together, young or old, is a worldwide happening.

The people of Haiti, for instance, have been so conditioned. And I know it's true of so many countries, certainly Brazil and other South American countries, Caribbean countries, the whole year is geared toward a time when one can have this freedom of rhythmic motion, with no kind of censorship practically. I think the reason people dance even in theatre, like our Company, or the Bolshoi, or any of the good companies, is because they must. I've always said that people dance because they need to. And I know in my case it was almost like salvation. I really needed this kind of body movement in order to feel an integrated whole.

D. DEMBY: Could you expand a little more on the contents of your course in Dance Anthropology?

K. DUNHAM: Well, when I got back to Southern Illinois University, I did my first courses in Dance Anthropology. And I began by using the methodology that Herskovits and my other professors had worked out for me to use in the West Indies. There is a whole system that is necessary to set up before going into a community to learn anything. And my feeling is that in learning its dances one should know dance. I feel that we have fallen in our Western civilization into thinking about dance as entertainment, chiefly. In other words, there is a footlight between the performer and the audience and the kinesthetic reaction of the audience is at a far lower level than it would be, say in a community where the dance was done for corn gathering, or whatever else you will. Where the community would have the same kinesthetic reaction as the dancer himself to the movements that he was doing.

So, I feel that we have lost a lot in our society, by making dance an entertainment only. If you take places like Java or Bali, dance is very highly refined and is a form of theater. In other words, there it would also be for entertainment but it is a language and communication understood by the entire community. There is not nearly as much communication in dance in the Western world. So I would say that dance has a long way to go in our society. It has very great possibilities as an instrument of communication.

D. DEMBY: If you were advising young people who seemed to have an interest in, or were groping for a sense of direction in this area, what would you advise them?

K. DUNHAM: Well, it depends on what they want. If they want to just simply be a dancer, we'll say in a company, then they have to extend their bodies even beyond their bodies' possibilities. They have to work physically to overcome space and gravity and whatever technique they attached themselves to. But I would feel that at the same time, if they could possibly become interested in the form and functions of the dances of other people, they would find a whole new horizon open to them, that would give them what I feel is so necessary. And that is the science and academics along with any art form.

D. DEMBY: Along your way you have come across, and had early

guidance from some of the most outstanding anthropologists and I wondered if you would tell me something about your experience with them.

K. DUNHAM: Well my first really serious, I'd say, professor in anthropology was Robert Redfield, whose interests were mainly in Mexico and in the Mexican villages. And then there were Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. Most of their work had been done, I think, in Australia, East Africa and the Pacific. Fay-Cooper Cole in the Philippines, Melville Herskovits in the Caribbean, chiefly Haiti and West Africa, and Franz Boas.

All of these people were interested in what is, I guess, my final greatest emphasis in anthropology, and that is *acculturation*: what happens to a people when one culture is superimposed on another, or when it is absorbed into another. And I looked at dance from this point of view. So I would see some of the formalized, European style, colonial dances in Martinique, and try to see how much of it was European, how much of it still might retain the African rhythm and the African style in movement. That's quite a fascinating study. It goes all through the acculturation that takes place anywhere in the world I suppose. But my interest with it, at that time, was in the West Indies.

D. DEMBY: Did you conclude, after your several searches, that the Maroon Country in Jamaica was perhaps the country where they retained their original dance form, or did you run across others?

K. DUNHAM: I found few things among the Maroon people that I could say might be traced back to Koromantee, like burial customs and so forth. But in their dances, I struggled with them days and days, and all I could get out of them was the fiddler coming from somewhere; and he would play the *contredanse* and the square dances. And then I noticed that usually, if the party went on long enough, and there was enough to drink and the drummers were good, at the end the people would break down into some of their, I would say, more African approaches to rhythm and movement.

But when I was with the Maroons in Accompong I had a very hard time finding what might be called the roots of their dances. They

were easier to find even in places as small as Martinique where the fighting dance, *l'Ag'ya*, had retained Africanisms. And certainly in Haiti it is all over the place.

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D. DEMBY: Early in your life, I think you were eight or nine, your writing abilities came out. As I remember, you published as a child in two different magazines. One was *Brownie Magazine* and the other *Child Life Magazine*. It is my understanding that *Brownie Magazine* was a magazine of Walter Dubois. Was he the publisher of it?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I remember that Langston Hughes published in the same issue. I must have been ten or eleven.

D. DEMBY: It just struck me that at that age, for you to have a contact with the black of Walter Dubois and his interest and concern for the blacks, I was wondering how you made the connection as a child.

K. DUNHAM: You see, I went to school in a town which at that time had very little imagination, Joliet, Illinois, and my school teachers would never have known anything about such a magazine, you know. I didn't write for them. I must have come across a copy and sent my story. When certain important black people came through town, they would sometimes stay at our house, because they couldn't stay at the local hotel. And I think that on more than one occasion he stopped there, so the name would have been familiar. But I was quite excited by their publication and at the time I thought I was going to become a great writer.

I remember my disillusionment when I launched out and wrote a story that took place in the far North, in some Arctic region, where this girl, who had been travelling there, had a baby. And when my mother read that, she nearly had a fit. (laughs) I remember her saying, "What do you mean she had a baby?" And I said, "Well, she just had a baby, that's all." I hadn't the faintest idea what was involved in having a baby. It was just to make my story come out the

way it should, because of course she survived. And you know my mother took the manuscript and put it in our base-burner and burned it up. I was really hurt, because I couldn't see that I had done anything wrong.

D. DEMBY: You also won a prize when you were a child with the poem you wrote which was published in *Child Life Magazine*. Do you remember what the poem was about?

K. DUNHAM: No, I wish I could remember it but I can't.

D. DEMBY: Are you still writing poetry?

K. DUNHAM: To a degree.

D. DEMBY: Your brother is very evident in everything that I have read, that he was the light of your life and meant a great deal to you, have you written anything or do you plan to write anything about him?

K. DUNHAM: I don't think so. I think if I had, I probably would have done it by now. There are some things that are too close to write about. I'll probably never write anything about my brother. I wouldn't be able to express what he meant to me. I don't have enough memories to call on at this stage of my life. But certainly, he was a very strong influence on my life.

D. DEMBY: Did your studies get published?

K. DUNHAM: Yes. *Journey to Accompong*, my experience with the Maroons, was published in 1946, and it was reprinted in the United States in 1971. *The Dances of Haiti*, (*Form and Function* was the subtitle) was first published in Mexico in 1947, both in Spanish and in English. Then it was published in France with the forward by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1957. And a coffee table version was published in the United States in 1983.

D. DEMBY: There have been a number of publications that are in print and then there are some that are not. Some of them are

articles, some are short stories, some are autobiographical and so forth. Would you tell me about your many publications?

K. DUNHAM: I published a great many articles. I started when I came back from the West Indies. My first major publication was for *Esquire* under the pseudonym of Kaye Dunn, because they wouldn't accept work from women at that time. And I did a couple of articles for them on my experiences in the West Indies.

And then I started doing a little writing and lecturing on the interrelation of form and function in primitive dance. That has always been one of my big interests: how form can affect function, and function can affect form, and so forth. I would publish in magazines like *Mademoiselle*, or *Travel*, or things like that. And I have written many short stories. One of them 'Audrey' was published in the Atlanta University journal *Phylon*.

I was very flattered that Langston Hughes considered among the best short stories by black writers, a story I had done about a bullfighter, which was called 'Afternoon into Night'. Then I had a little story in *Ellery Queen Magazine*, called 'The Crime of Pablo Martinez.'

D. DEMBY: I am intrigued how and when you had the time because these stories were written during a period when you were very busy, weren't you?

K. DUNHAM: Yes. I would think of them either when I had a moment or two in my dressing room, but chiefly after I had gotten home at night, if I didn't sleep. I would begin to take notes. I had a huge notebook which I kept beside my bed. I would write thoughts and poetry, and outlines for stories and so forth in this notebook. It can hardly be called a notebook, it was a heavy volume that I carried for years.

But the hardest thing was writing books. My major work, *A Touch of Innocence*, published in 1959, and republished in 1994, autobiographical from my birth to my first eighteen years, was done after I let the Company go in Tokyo, where I stayed for about a year.

I almost finished the book there, and then came to Haiti and actually finished it.

I had to wait until both my mother and father, and my brother had died, before writing it, because I didn't want to hurt their feelings. And still I couldn't write it without telling the truth. So I told what I felt was the truth of my first eighteen years. And it was very hard to do. Sometimes I would just sit and cry all day. Fortunately I was living in an attic that had a beautiful view of Mount Fuji, and when the weather was good I used to sit and look at it and type away.

I had the good luck to have Bernard Berenson, the Renaissance critic, as a friend. We corresponded for ten years and during that period I sent him chapters of *A Touch of Innocence* and he was convinced that I should be a writer by profession. He helped me a great deal, because he would comment and I think when you write you have to write *to someone*. Every writer must have that. And Berenson was my sounding board.

D. DEMBY: In your later years you wrote several books.

K. DUNHAM: I've had to date five books published. Besides the ones I have already mentioned, there are also *Island Possessed*, 1969 and republished in 1994, about my Haitian experiences. *Kasamance*, an African fable was published in 1974.

I am now working on three books at the same time. My main book that I must get done I have called *The Minefield* for the moment. Because I have been thinking things over, aware of the fact that I had to learn so much in term of tact, patience, etc. during the course of my life with the Company, that I felt I was a person who was just tip-toeing over territory that might explode at any moment. And it was very true, because usually we were first in so many things. And that wasn't always accepted by the average American. I don't think they were all happy at the reception we had or the allure of our stage presentation. It wasn't the way they thought about black people, or 'colored people' as one was known then.'

D. DEMBY: So your title *The Minefield* implies the explosiveness?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, it implies the care with which I had to walk through life when I was leading the Company into its highest period, which was in Europe.

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D. DEMBY: Have you seen the film on Evita Peròn that is now available? I wondered what you thought of it.

K. DUNHAM: No, I haven't seen it, but I know the musical is supposed to have been very good.

D. DEMBY: Actually I meant the musical. You knew her personally.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, she insisted that our whole show move from the theater we were in to the Opera House, because she and her husband didn't go anywhere but to the Opera House, for security reasons I imagine. So we were ordered to take the whole show out, and our poor impresario had to pay for the hanging and un-hanging on a union scale. And we moved to the Opera House just for one night. It was a benefit for some of her works and she charged anywhere from fifty dollars to I don't know, just outlandish prices.

And I was very annoyed with her because she invited me to meet some of the government ministers in her box. And I went. We were drinking champagne, and I asked if she would mind sending something to the Company. Of course I should never in the world have done this, with someone like Evita Peròn. (laughs) But she sent one bottle of brandy to them. And then later, before we left, the waiter presented us with a bill for it. So, I thought, after all that we had done surely... But that's the way she was. I was glad to have met her.

And we went out to a large barbecue at their country estate. I remember sitting next to Peròn and I asked him why there were not more black people in Argentina. He said, "Well the weather is humid here and they all died of tuberculosis."

For me one of the most difficult things with Evita Peròn was the fact that she got up very early in the morning. And you know, working in theater you finish very late, as in many Latin countries. We'd get out of the theater around midnight, and then would have to find someplace where we could eat after the show. Frequently, I wouldn't be in bed before two or three o'clock in the morning. And then Evita would arrange to send her brother, whose name was Juan, to pick me up at the hotel. I would have enjoyed this much more had it been a little later in the day. But usually by eight o'clock my escort would be there. And we would start out to either see one of her medical centers, children's centers or centers for wayward women, and whatever else you will.

I admired her dynamism and I thought she was extremely handsome. And I couldn't help but admire her determination to make the city into what she wanted. She didn't get to do it but I am sure a certain amount of good might have been done in the very beginning. I don't know.

D. DEMBY: Did she express any interest in your performances, or any opinions on it?

K. DUNHAM: Well, when I would meet her early in the morning, she didn't go with us on these various expeditions. She would send my escort. But usually we would go first to her office and greet her. But frankly she seemed to be more interested in what I was wearing, than in what we'd be doing. And we gave each other the eye, I must say. (laughs)

D. DEMBY: What might you have been wearing for instance?

K. DUNHAM: Oh, I might have been wearing one of my favorite uniforms, an Amazon riding habit that Hermès had made for me. But the skirt was made so that it was not a pure Amazon, it just gave that impression. And I wore that the first day I saw her. And at that time I had a diamond lapel pin and my decorations from the government of Haiti, and I saw her studying these.

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D. DEMBY: Do you have most of your costumes?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I'd say we have most. Unfortunately, our impresario was young and inexperienced, and instead of allowing enough costumes for a change over, if necessary, he just took the costumes of the show we were using. But I carried most of mine. Truthfully we couldn't possibly show one tenth of the costumes at the Museum now. So I think that I'll start with the showing of my own costumes, and we do have the *Batucada* costume.

D. DEMBY: What about the accessories that went with the costumes?

J. PRATT: Lots of jewelry and lots of turbans and lots of handkerchiefs and lots of accessories. You also had one of those Brazilian things with objects hanging on it. I don't know where those ever went to.

K. DUNHAM: Oh, yes, I have one. Someone brought me one from Brazil not long ago. I was certainly sorry to lose those. But, from time to time, things would just simply disappear from the baggage.

In Hong Kong I had decided to wear the typical Chinese cheongsam, the high neck dress with the split up each side. And I ended up by packing most of my French and Italian originals in one very large trunk, and wore just the cheongsam all the way through the East.

We got to Hong Kong. I remember, that night I was going to a party for Isaac Stern and his wife, I wanted to wear something else. I was tired of wearing cheongsams all the time. Madeline Preston was helping me with my baggage and dressing and I asked about a dress that I liked very much, it was Italian I think. And she started to look for it, and she looked and she looked. We discovered that the entire trunk, where I had so carefully separated my European clothes from those that were made in the East and Far East, had disappeared.

So, I was already sick with the Malaysian flu and I got sicker. We telephoned. We had the police. We went back down to the dock

where the things had come off the boat. Not a sign, never. My poor impresario was so upset at my distress that he offered a reward, but not a sign of anything ever showed up.

J. PRATT: Miss Dunham has been dressed by some very fashionable dress makers: Pierre Balmain especially, and she really has some quite wonderful clothes of his.

K. DUNHAM: Maggy Rouff. Dior...

D. DEMBY: I understand there was a whole line of women's attire that had been created in Paris known as the Katherine Dunham line.

K. DUNHAM: Jean Barthe used to come and sit in a box and sketch all evening.

J. PRATT: And developed a line of things for you. Jean Barthe was the second greatest hat maker, I would say, in Paris.

K. DUNHAM: And I used to wear a little hat that I liked very much. It was tiny with black flat feathers, so instead of hair it looked like my head was feathers. It was very pretty. One day I got sick and tired of hair. Julio, one of our Cuban drummers, was a good barber and I had him cut off my hair just in a natural boy's haircut.

D. DEMBY: Did you wear wigs in your stage costumes?

J. PRATT: Well, they would be painted wigs. They were made out of hemp and wool. They were very seldom made out of hair.

K. DUNHAM: And they were not really meant to be wigs. I guess they were meant to be headdresses.

J. PRATT: She had this headdress with braids and then beads on the end of the braid.

D. DEMBY: Well, Miss Dunham, at the time you were certainly a forerunner of the current hairstyles, that the black ladies have taken on.

K. DUNHAM: It interests me when I see different things like that attributed to other people. And then I realize that we were out of the country so much. And whenever we came back, I would see that eager look on other dancer's and choreographer's faces. Because they felt we would only be there for such a short run and no one expected us to really stay long enough to recognize plagiarism of our own choreography and costumes.

There was a period when you could see John Pratt's hand in so many Hollywood costumes. And you could certainly see my choreography all over the place. But those were the times when we did not intend to stay long and so they would grab little bits and run with them.

D. DEMBY: Mr. Pratt, how many people did you have to help you get these costumes together? I think they must have been a large number.

J. PRATT: Very often quite a large number. We often had a lot of people sewing. And I wasn't above sewing myself, I'm very fast at a sewing machine. We used to carry a number of sewing machines.

D. DEMBY: Do you remember any catastrophes like costumes falling off, or things like that?

J. PRATT: No. The hammock in *Veracruzana* fell down a couple of times.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, and I fell right down on my back! (laughs)

D. DEMBY: Mr. Pratt told me about his nightmares concerning the show. Did you have any?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, I used to have nightmares, and now and then I still have dreams about missing a cue. Once in St. Louis for the opening of the new Auditorium, which still wasn't finished, you could smell the wet paint. There were showers in the dressing rooms. It was very hot, I was very hot. I finished one number and foolishly thought I would have time to shower before the next number. Just as I stepped out of the shower, I heard the introduction to *Barrelhouse*. And I could see my partner going back and forth across the stage by

himself trying to fill in. I had to dry, I don't think I bothered to dry. But getting on a net stocking pantyhose over a wet body and then the dress, and the hat was just agony. And it was the first, and only time, that I missed a cue.

J. PRATT: I often dream of arriving late. (laughs)

D. DEMBY: Any other real catastrophes. (laughs)

K. DUNHAM: Well, once for an opening performance in Mexico City, which was sponsored by a group of young Americans, we found ourselves without the baggage. They had gone overboard in bringing us down and I knew it was very costly for them. They were nervous, and we were nervous too. The costumes and the scenery were at the border where the customs were going through it, piece by piece.

J. PRATT: The main problem was the fur coat.

K. DUNHAM: That's right. It all happened because in *Flaming youth*, a 1920 number, we have a man carrying a clarinet case and one man in a long raccoon coat. (laughs) And this coat was in rags, on purpose. But they wanted to put some kind of an exorbitant fee at the border, on this coat.

J. PRATT: Importation.

K. DUNHAM: The only solution was to simply put on our best rehearsal clothes, go out and do a lecture-demonstration and one or two numbers from the show that would look good in black tights and leotards. And the people were wildly enthusiastic. Mr. Hurok who was managing us at that moment was highly impressed.

J. PRATT: That idea was later picked up by the Bolshoi Ballet.

D. DEMBY: What would you say was the most expensive costume?

K. DUNHAM: For me personally I think *Veracruzana*. Because we had two sisters who were real French couturières who worked on it for, it seemed to me, weeks before we got there.

J. PRATT: And it just barely got there in time. I had to carry it myself.

K. DUNHAM: But it was a very costly costume. I had two of those, because one couldn't get it cleaned or laundered on one day.

D. DEMBY: How did you meet Mr. Pratt? I think he certainly made a great contribution to you, as a designer, my goodness, how did you meet him?

K. DUNHAM: Well, we met in Chicago. He was working with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) as a supervisor. And I was in the writing project and then in the theater project. Funnily enough, we never met at the University, although we were both there at the same time. But, we met during *L'Ag'ya*. I would say that cemented our relationship.

J. PRATT: It was an enormous success.

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D. DEMBY: I would like to talk about some of your choreographies, like *Choros* for instance.

K. DUNHAM: Well, *Choros* is a Brazilian piece which has a lot of balletic work in it. It started out with my hearing the composer, Vadico Gagliano, who was our pianist, just playing around with it on the piano. I asked him what it was and he told me. I became very much interested because the idea of a rather Bach-like influence on the rhythmic patterns of Brazil had been with me for a long time, but I couldn't find the right piece of music.

This has developed from one *Choros* into five now and, I'd say, it was probably my strongest piece of work in terms of just pure technique. It's a lovely piece, and it captures what Brazil has in music. All of the great composers, Villa-Lobos is one, are so influenced by European music, particularly the period of Bach I would say and Chopin maybe, while the rhythm is persistently Brazilian. This is the sort of

thing out of which will grow the whole *Choros*, the five of them together, about eighteen minutes. I really look on it as a rather major work. I'm just sorry that it's not being done right now.

D. DEMBY: And *Rites de Passage*?

K. DUNHAM: *Rites de Passage* is also a very strong number, an idea that in primitive societies people are aided in passing from one phase of life into another, by the participation of the whole community. A boy comes of age: there is a circumcision rite, then a marriage and then death. These are the three major parts, *Puberty*, *Fertility* and *Death*. The other one, *Women's Mysteries*, I did only once in Paris and we just found it too complicated musically and also in staging. I hope one day to revive it.

D. DEMBY: Going back to your intuitive powers. And how things just come to you intuitively, would you say that *Rites de Passage* was an inspiration?

K. DUNHAM: I think it came almost directly from an anthropological background. But it could also have come out of a kind of sensitivity. I think Cancerians have also the capacity to transfer disciplines, ideas and structures and so forth, and I transferred this interest in primitive society and how they protected the individual. I was struck at the same time by how, in Western society, the individual just makes it the best he can. So I decided to try it. It's not African actually, it gives a feeling of an abstract African design, but that was a choice on my part.

D. DEMBY: Why was this controversial in certain communities?

K. DUNHAM: You mean like Boston?

D. DEMBY: Yes.

K. DUNHAM: I think the program notes did it, frankly. I'm not sure, but in the 'mating', our program notes commented on the fact that the sexual drive between the young man and the young woman, who

come of age, is felt and encouraged and protected by the entire community. It's probably that just the use of the word sex did it. I don't know. But, also the girls had a large expanse of waistline exposed. And there were certain movements in it too which I abstracted and so, to me, it did not have the same meaning that it probably did to the critic in Boston who was shocked and horrified.

I am sometimes astonished by the amount of choreography that I did, most of which I would probably not be able to recapture without the aid of the members of the Company. My husband has a memory like an elephant, and so does Lenwood Morris. For instance, John can describe the auditorium of the theater in Columbia or Peru, but I was never out in front of the house. A Cancerian needs a foyer, a home, a place, and within that place his creative work is done. So, living out of trunks and different hotels, it did not take me long to realize that my home, my refuge, was in the theater, not in front of it because that's where John Pratt comes in. He can remember everything about the front of the theater.

I can tell you about the backstage because I always used to go at least two or three hours before the performance. I would have time to warm up and then lie on stage and just look out at the empty theater or into the catwalks, where the curtains were hung. We had Italian opera draped curtains, the same familiar curtains no matter what theater we were in, made it like home to me, moving around as we did in hotel after hotel.

D. DEMBY: You carried your drapes with you?

K. DUNHAM: Oh yes. I would say that we innovated so much in terms of lighting and costuming and décor, that all those were as much an innovation as the Dunham Technique and the choreography itself.

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D. DEMBY: The other point that I wanted to ask you, you were talking about having gone to a psychoanalyst very briefly.

K. DUNHAM: I was fortunate enough to know people like Harry Stack Sullivan or Eric Fromm, people like that to whom I would talk. Certainly with Eric Fromm I talked a great deal of my problems and aspirations, but he never analyzed me. I did not go to him as a psychoanalyst, it was as a friend. Of course, the ethics of psychoanalysis is not to analyze anyone with whom one has a close personal relationship.

At the University of Chicago they had a service for psychoanalysis and when I told my brother some of my dreams, he said, "You better go and see this psychoanalyst." I didn't know that he had been going himself, but he suggested that I go and try to get some further understanding of myself because the dreams were beginning to bother me a great deal. So I went to see this analyst but only saw him a few times because he committed suicide and left me hanging on a limb. So I have never been psychoanalyzed really.

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D. DEMBY: I wonder if you would enumerate what the Dunham Complex consists of.

K. DUNHAM: Well, of course, everything that has to do with theater, posters, programs, photographs, handwritten notes on choreography, and that is one side of my professional life. The next thing I'd say of great importance is my writing life. It would be rather important from an educational point of view to classify all the proposals I have written over the years: proposals for the museum, for projects in East St. Louis, and so forth and so on. This probably took more of my intellectual life than anything else. Between that and the lectures, that would be one whole area in its own.

D. DEMBY: The ideas that you injected into the various proposals, are they ideas that you feel are still viable to be perused and considered?

K. DUNHAM: I'd say for the most part they are things that I would gladly, if financed, take on. We began and I think probably we were

the first to start body movement and performing arts for the aging. We did not have a grant for it although I had written a couple of papers hoping to be financed for this, so we had to just use the people already on staff who couldn't work very well because they had other duties. But we did have a small group of elderly ladies performing, that went on a lecture-demonstration tour with me as far as Connecticut one time. It was wonderful for them and it was wonderful for the old people that we performed for. We did everything from dancing to just body motion for people of that age.

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D. DEMBY: How did you make contact with top people such as Sol Hurok? Did you have an agent that made these contacts for you?

K. DUNHAM: No, I didn't have an agent. They came to me. In this period of time, we appeared at the San Francisco Opera, and that was simply because someone had seen us perhaps in *Cabin in the Sky* and came to me and said, "How would we like to appear at the San Francisco Opera?" Of course, I said yes right away. And one of the embarrassing things is that I didn't realize that we had to have a complete orchestration for *Rites de Passage*, because we had always been doing it only with a very small orchestra or two pianos. We arrived two days ahead of time in San Francisco and Paquita Anderson, who was our accompanist and musical director then, had to sit down with the help of some of the San Francisco orchestra and do an orchestration that would be satisfactory for them to play. We put on quite a show; and *Barrelhouse* was done also, which I think is the first time such a jazz number was done in the Opera House.

I believe that Howard Skinner, who was the director of the San Francisco Symphony, brought Sol Hurok to a rehearsal. But I'm sure Hurok had seen us before in New York and just had not made up his mind. So he came to see us in rehearsal and decided on touring us in *Tropical Revue* in the United States. The first two years of the tour, 1943 and 1944 were wonderful years. I was getting acquainted with the United States, handling a company, and struggling with the

hardships of touring, yet the gratification of having the audiences that we did, made it worthwhile. So that was *Tropical Revue*.

In the meantime, I had been to New York on several occasions to open a school there and I did open a school. And it was finally settled on 43rd street, across from the Times building. It was our biggest and our best known school. And I had an opportunity there to work, to put to use my theories of academics and performing arts. We had a wonderful staff and people from Columbia University who gave classes in anthropology and philosophy. Well, it was just a whole new approach to education. We had the performing arts, academics and science in one school.

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D. DEMBY: All of these things seemed to be happening during some of the most crucial periods of American life. The Second World War was going on during that period, and some of our most serious difficulties as a racial group. How did you survive all that?

K. DUNHAM: Well, it wasn't easy. We ran into problems. As far as the war is concerned, we ran into all sorts of transportation problems. Sometimes they would drag out some of the oldest, most worn trains and we had so much baggage to carry that all of our plans had to be made so they didn't interfere with the railroad's other needs.

And then I had some really furious experiences with color discrimination in terms of many things that I might have done alone. I was able to get them done only because I had a white husband and a white secretary, where I was brought sharply to pass by certain situations that would not accept the full Company, I mean like, restaurants, and hotels, housing and so forth and so on.

And on more than one occasion, I remember calling Mr. Hurok and telling him that he would have to cancel a performance unless the management allowed tickets to be sold to black people just as they were sold to anyone else. And it's interesting, I don't think that he

even knew that this was happening, or would happen. But I must say that he took my side most of the time. And we won on one or two occasions when I just refused to let the curtain go up until I knew that black people were able to sit in the auditorium. And I remember one woman saying, "We can't buy orchestra seats. We have to sit in the balcony or in the gallery." And I said, "We'll have to change that. If you will get a group together for me, I'll see that you have tickets in the orchestra." Which I did, and which displeased the management a great deal. But I saw that it was almost a losing battle. Touring was hard because of the war.

John Pratt had gone into the army. And we did run into these color problems that, for the most part, had to do with the comfort and convenience of the Company itself. So I was thinking seriously of leaving the United States as soon as I could.

But opening the school was a great thing for me because we had no problems in terms of color or prejudice. I'd say that we were about sixty percent white and forty percent black. And I found that the black students couldn't afford to pay, so we had to give out endless scholarships, which was very hard on balancing the budget of the school, which finally caused it to close.

D. DEMBY: There are those who feel that you were a great contributor, a forerunner to the civil rights legislation.

K. DUNHAM: Oh, I know it's true. I never appreciated it when the manager of the theater would say, "We've arranged for your Company to have their meals at this or that restaurant, a quite good restaurant. But they only do it because it is your Company." And he felt that I would be flattered by that. But that happened a great deal with us. And I felt very good about the fact that we did make changes. We left many a theater where the thing of not selling orchestra seats to black people was changed while we were there, and never taken up again.

That happened in St. Louis for instance. My mother and father were coming from Joliet to see me for the first time and I put up such a thing, and called Mr. Hurok again. And he managed to get box seats

for them, and get the orchestra open for other people. Also I was staying at a hotel that had been extremely prejudiced. At that time St. Louis was a Southern town. And I had managed to get an apartment there. I simply applied for it, and that was that. You know, I didn't say I am black and want an apartment, so I got it and there was a great deal of unhappiness after I moved in. But nothing was done.

D. DEMBY: What prompted you to choreograph *Southland*?

K. DUNHAM: *Southland* was the result of the lynching of a young boy. We were touring then, we were in Argentina. You know, I thought here we are in the rest of the world and these things are still happening in the United States, and I suddenly got fed up with it. I thought of all the work we had done when I was in the University of Chicago, speaking of civil rights. Well, there was one group of us that would go deliberately to restaurants where we heard there was discrimination, which would be practically all of them in Chicago, and file lawsuits if we were not served. And this was rather nerve-racking, but I remember doing that several times while I was at the University.

When I heard about the lynching of this young boy, I had done so many things in the theater and I decided it was about time for me to do something important. And so, I began rehearsing *Southland*, which was the lynching of a boy for an alleged attack on a white woman. Julie Robinson played the part of the girl that was supposedly raped. She did a beautiful job of pantomime, in rousing the whole community to lynch this boy. I wrote a script first, in order to get the feeling that I wanted in pantomime, and then get that feeling into the performers. And I remember how hard it was for Julie to use the word 'nigger', which was her only spoken word. Oh, how she protested. You know, I tried to show her its function in the whole theme. I had a hard time with the Company doing that, because they cried all the time. (laughs)

It was so real and so shocking because they were aware of things in theaters and what I had done in protesting segregation in theaters and hotels. But they had forgotten that, I guess.

But finally the Company got together and understood my reasons for doing this. And did a beautiful job in Santiago, Chile, at the Opera House, where we had been asked to do a new work. And I had sent the script ahead. Of course I had deleted the conversation, simply left the description.

At the opening I stood in front of the curtain over the overture of the music, explaining that the more a man loves his country, the more he is willing to take the risk of criticizing it. And that I loved my country, but I could see that it had a great illness in it, and so forth and so on. The American Embassy had asked me not to do it. And they had asked John Pratt if he couldn't influence me not to do it. He knew that he wouldn't be able to. But they were having problems in Chile, and this would only make it worse. My contention has always been, if these things were not happening I wouldn't do it. If they are, I have to comment. So they thought it was very wrong of me, but we did it again in Paris and had a great ovation. But believe me, I was scolded backstage by many irate Americans.

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D. DEMBY: Do you have any comments in reference to nightclub performances.

K. DUNHAM: I think it was quite remarkable that having no backing whatsoever we were able to survive. I think it is the real accomplishment of my life, that without subsidy we survived. And the main reason was that we were able to cross so many disciplines in dance. We could do a very good show for nightclubs, as we did in Las Vegas, and we would go from nightclub to opera house to theater all over the world. For instance, when they didn't have an adequate theater in the South of France, in Nîmes, we set up the bullring to be able to play.

D. DEMBY: Perhaps it has been this hardship and struggle that has solidified your Company. In spite of their own individual

personalities there is a feeling of something that cannot be taken away. A closeness through those hard years.

K. DUNHAM: I think that is very true. That's where that close-knit family thing comes in. That we went through so much together. And I always feel overjoyed to see the former members of the Company. A few of them have come to East St. Louis. But usually I see them in New York on special occasions. Like the Carnegie Hall occasion. I'm really overjoyed by the fact that they seem to have kept their personalities. People used to tell me in Europe that they could recognize Dunham dancers from a distance, by the way they walked. And they said it in a complementary way. I was very pleased with that.

D. DEMBY: You are a pioneer. You have been the first in many things.

K. DUNHAM: We have been first in so many things, that sometimes it seems almost a little embarrassing. But I noticed that we did the first hour-long American spectacular: NBC in 1939; and then the first hour long spectacular, BBC London 1952. And then Paris, 1952 and 1953, Buenos Aires, 1955. Going right down the line, practically we always did television, if they had the facilities wherever we were.

One of our last big appearance was in Vienna in 1960. That's when the Company separated for a period of time. We did a very big television spectacular there in Vienna.

D. DEMBY: How did you feel about performing on television as opposed to a live audience? Did you get satisfaction out of it?

K. DUNHAM: I've never liked television a lot. I've never liked movies much. I've just done it as a job, as well as I could. I prefer a live audience. Always. But, with television, part of it was public relations and sometimes it was prestige and sometimes it was money. I am disappointed that we haven't done more television in America. The last one, you know, was Channel Thirteen, *Divine Drumbeats*.

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D. DEMBY: So what about your musical compositions?

K. DUNHAM: Well, I am a member of the Italian Authors and Composers Union (SIAE) and I am a member of ASCAP in America. And some is on the basis of having collected material that was public domain, and some on the basis of actual compositions.

As I don't play an instrument well enough to compose on it, I used to work with my pianists on whatever music we were using, and guide them into the tone, and the harmony and the feelings that we wanted in the music. I also have credit in the film *Mambo* for two songs and I have some credit for music in *Rites de Passage* where I composed a melodic line that was used.

D. DEMBY: Do you write the scores for these?

K. DUNHAM: I don't write the scores. I have guided the development of a number of them. But the composers have full credit.

D. DEMBY: Who has been your leading musical director?

K. DUNHAM: Well, Leslie Harnley was the last. He was with us for twenty-five years. And we had a Brazilian conductor named Badico, who composed our *Choros*. And another one named Valdes. He was a very fine Cuban conductor. And a woman named Dorothea Freitag did a good deal of composing for us and played first piano.

D. DEMBY: Do you have any copies of any of the musical compositions? Are they in your archives?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, they are. Our music is in pretty good shape. The hardest thing was going from a small orchestra of maybe seven, eight pieces in a nightclub, to orchestrations that went from two pianos to a hundred pieces. And we carried all this with us because we never knew, just like in Argentina when they asked us to appear at the Colon Theater, what the demands would be, so that made a great deal of music.

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D. DEMBY: I am interested in knowing the purpose, the objectives and the activities of the Katherine Dunham Foundation. What are its current activities?

K. DUNHAM: Well, anything to which my name is attached has as its objective the study and the preservation of arts and culture.

D. DEMBY: When you say arts and culture, do you mean black arts and culture, or the Third World?

K. DUNHAM: No, it is not confined to black. My interest, I think I mentioned this before, is chiefly Third World. But certainly if I came across something as I did in the north of France when I found some unusually shaped stones and artifacts that had been left from before Viking time, and compared them with those found in Haiti and in the Caribbean area and in Illinois, this would be an example of my archeological interest being exercised in cultural terms. So, it is not just black, it is a general human interest.

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D. DEMBY: I thought it would be interesting to move on to your feelings about the aspirations that you may have set for yourself in your earlier years.

K. DUNHAM: I think that as far as what I expected of life as a child, I have experienced it. I wouldn't have known how to expect all of the things that have happened to me. But I remember, I don't know where it could have come from, I must have been around sixteen and I used to think, oh, if I could only leave Joliet and go someplace where it is warm and tropical and there is a swimming pool. I think the childhood ambitions were to succeed at something. I wanted to *be*. And I think first it was in writing. When I was very small, I thought I was going to be a nurse or a doctor, because I used to pick

up all the sick kittens and sparrows with broken legs, and that sort of thing. But that phase passed over and I went into the writing phase. And then, in college I thought that I might be an anthropologist, but I was by then so taken with dancing, that I knew I would have to either meet, or give up and try to become a dancer.

D. DEMBY: What has been your most fulfilling experience of all the things that have happened to you, that brought you the greatest sense of accomplishment?

K. DUNHAM: Well, I find that very hard to say. The tribute to me at Carnegie Hall was really a wonderful thing. To see so many people that I had not seen for years, some that I didn't know but who wanted to see me and know me. Every time we had an opening, it seemed to me that it wasn't as important as the next. And I can't think of an opening where I did not suffer before. I'd say particularly in Paris, because Paris critics are very critical.

But I just can't say, I think when I was able to firmly establish the Performing Arts Training Center in East St. Louis, it was very gratifying for me. It has been gratifying to pass the stage as a "*mambo*" (Vodoun Priestess) which I am. It's been gratifying to me to overcome difficult audiences and feel their appreciation. I don't know, but it just seems to me that when I start out to do something this is the real challenge to me. Once I get on the road of doing it, my own dynamism seems to carry me along so that sometimes the thing is done and over before I really realize it. But beginning to do it is very hard for me. Like beginning to paint. Still, I was so happy when I would be satisfied with a picture, or doing some choreography, and I'd be so happy when it turned out the way I wanted it to, and was received the way I wanted it to. So I think that my life has been a series of gratifications. Now, that sounds practically impossible. And I'm not denying that I've had some very difficult times, and some very low periods when I would almost lose confidence. But if I look at my life as a whole, it's been very gratifying. And practically anything that seems serious enough as a challenge to work on, or begin on, I feel that if it can be humanly done I'll do it for me, or for somebody else.

D. DEMBY: Going to the other extreme you've had, as you said, ups and downs like anyone. But what would you say was your most painful, most devastating experience?

K. DUNHAM: Well, I'd say that we had a time in San Francisco when our impresario had just judged things badly I suppose. I don't know what the reason was but the management went broke. And usually I had some reserve, or an advance contract that I could call on. We had one of our most difficult times in San Francisco. And we had a difficult time in Monte Carlo one summer. But the weather was so beautiful, and the whole atmosphere was so pleasant and we did have enough money to be able to live and to rehearse. And, just before closing the Company in Vienna, we had a contract to go to Czechoslovakia which was denied us by the State Department, so we had a bad period which was extremely hard.

I think the most difficult things for me in the Company were when someone disappointed me, not in their dancing, but in their personality, in their behavior, and in those things that I had tried to make them feel conscious about. And then of course I've had difficult periods with the loss of people, like Leslie Harnley, or Julio Mendez, one of our drummers. He drummed and danced last at Carnegie Hall at the age of eighty. And most recently Lenwood Morris, who was like my right hand in remembering things and reconstructing choreography.

These things are very hard for me because a company is more than a family. I mean, in a traditional family, once they are adults, they go off on their own. But in the Company, even though they might go off for awhile, you might separate for awhile, you're always back together again as soon as the Company is functioning, so that we were very close.

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D. DEMBY: You've spent many wonderful years, professionally and personally, and you have reached a certain age in life. I wonder, would you like to be any other age now, are you happy with it?

K. DUNHAM: I can't imagine being different than I am in any way. The only change I would like... I'd like very much to lose a little weight. I'm not trying to find my image, as I would have seen myself twenty years ago. I would like to lose a little weight just because there are a lot of steps around this place, and it's easier to go up and down. But I have no interest in changing my years, appearance, or anything.

D. DEMBY: You're constantly described as a very beautiful woman, not only in external beauty, but in inward beauty. So it seems as though you have some secrets. What kind of advice would you offer to people?

K. DUNHAM: I would say that learning your own equilibrium is the important thing. Every person's balance is different from another person's and you have to learn your own through constant introspection and experimentation. And I think that keeping one's mind current with what is happening is another way of keeping the mind young.

Now, I know that those people who have to suddenly retire and find themselves without the means to live are faced with a great problem, because there is no provision in our country for the inflation that's going on in terms of what the retired people have to live on. So, that kind of anxiety ages people more than the years themselves.

But if we could think comparatively too, that's a great help. And that's been one of the helps of so much travelling and of intercultural interests that I have: that you learn to think of yourself as an entity that's able to do what you want to do. Therefore, my aspiration is not to go out on the stage and do certain numbers that I have done before. That's another part of my life, and I'm happy it has happened. I don't begrudge myself or suffer about not being in the theater again, or whatever you will. I feel that I have changed with my own capacity and have developed a capacity for humanism and wisdom. And that everything is compensatory. If I had to change my life now for my life when I was touring, I wouldn't do it, because I was then a different person. And this life that I am in now gratifies me and satisfies me, as long as I can give to it.

D. DEMBY: Do you feel that older people, if they have the inclination, should continue dancing, perhaps not professionally but just for sheer pleasure.

K. DUNHAM: Oh yes. Our interest in the performing arts for the aging proves it. I think dance is fundamental. When someone asks me, "When did you stop dancing?". I always say I haven't, I never have. Because whether I'm in motion or not, I always carry within me the rhythms and harmonies that I feel relate me to what I see or what I hear. And for me that's a form of dancing.

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D. DEMBY: In your book *A Touch of Innocence* you talk about your fears of childhood. I wanted to know, at this point in your life, what do you fear most? What gives you an uneasy feeling?

K. DUNHAM: I feel uneasy around people whom I observe, who have no knowledge of their own psyches and no control over themselves. In other words, you can see a person who is way out of it, maybe on drugs, or a person who is insane, who has lost touch with himself, or with his gods, or whatever you will. And this disturbs me a great deal. I don't like to see a human being whose ecstasy rests in violence. I am disturbed by that sort of thing.

D. DEMBY: The other aspect that would be interesting to know would be, what do you fear that you have missed in life?

K. DUNHAM: I don't fear I've missed anything in life. I feel very full, and for a long time I have been interested in the idea of death and been quite prepared to experience that among my other experiences. I don't think that I've missed anything. I have actually achieved more, and been given more, and been helped to do more than I could have imagined.

D. DEMBY: If you were to begin all over again, would you want your life to be the same or different?

K. DUNHAM: I would keep it the same. Maybe I would like to have done more for my mother and father, but then I did everything I could.

D. DEMBY: If you had three wishes to be granted, what would they be?

K. DUNHAM: Well, I would like health for myself and for everyone. And certainly I am deeply concerned about the health of my husband. And some people to whom I am very close. But I would like to see in the world more people who knew where they wanted to go, and that where they wanted to go was for very positive things. I'd like a change somehow in the destructiveness and the violence that there is in the world today. But I think my personal wishes would be some change in man for the better, health and wisdom.

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D. DEMBY: Could we talk about *Divine Drumbeats, Katherine Dunham and Her People*?

K. DUNHAM: Was that it? Yes, I know it had what I thought was very amusing: *Katherine Dunham and her people*, something like that. (laughs) They came down here to get the Haitian background. And they filmed different aspects of Haiti. It is such a beautiful country, it's ideal for filming. Then they came here where we live, and where we have a peristyle, which is the *vodoun* theater really. We had a ceremony for them, which was almost frighteningly realistic.

I find that the people who work here with us, who come here when we have appearances for the public are just as sincere as if they were doing a ceremony for someone who was sick and needed to be cured. In other words, I don't think they act or simulate, it is a way of life. When the drums start and play certain rhythms for certain gods, they either get possessed or they don't.

D. DEMBY: Miss Dunham, would you describe the peristyle here on your premises?

K. DUNHAM: The *vodoun* complex is made up of a *hounfor*, or a temple, in which there are the things only to be handled or touched by the high priest and *mambo*, or the people designated by them. And in there are different artifacts of the gods, and clothing of the gods and what's called *pot tête* and it usually has paintings of the different gods that belong to that particular complex. And outside the *hounfor* is a large peristyle, it can be rectangular or circular. Ours is circular. In the middle of this peristyle is a *Poteau Mitan*, or middle post, which goes right up to the ceiling of the peristyle and is supposed to be there for the gods to descend from the sky, or mount from the earth. And we have paintings which are the insignia of the different gods. We couldn't possibly get them all in because, I think, actually the gods in Haiti now number in the hundreds.

D. DEMBY: Just getting to the décor of your *hounfor* I wonder who did the artwork? It's outstanding.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, it is outstanding. It was done by a young Israeli, the son-in-law of our manager, Rosie Rubenstein. I had a book of Milo Rigaud, which had all of the different signatures of the gods in it. But it was not in color. So this young man painted each god with the colors belonging to him. Like *Petro* is red, *Damballa* is blue and white, and so forth. I'd say during the year we would have probably at least two or three big ceremonies at our peristyle. But in between we have dances that are open to the public. And we give those, oh... probably once a month. And they are my effort to keep the dances of Haiti authentic, trying to keep the people in our peristyle acquainted with the original steps.

D. DEMBY: I wonder if you would want to move into another area of your experiences, that is the many lectures that you made around the country and around the world.

K. DUNHAM: I avoided lectures as much as I could for a while because I think I once said that dancers don't make good talkers. But almost everywhere I went, because of my anthropological

background, I would be asked to talk or lecture. And this has been from the Royal Anthropological Society in London, and in Brussels, and the University of Chicago and Yale University and then Mexico. These are the periods of say 1937 to 1939.

D. DEMBY: Where these topics on anthropology?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, they were. Some of them were on my own life and my own history. I usually had a question and answer period, because I found that people were very curious about how I started doing what I was doing. And what I thought, just as you asked me now, what I thought about the *vodoun* and so forth. Sometimes there were lecture-demonstrations, like at Yale in 1939. We were in *Cabin in the Sky* at the time. The whole Company went with me to Yale and demonstrated as I talked about my use of the primitive material for the theater and how I developed a way to use it for the theater. That was a great favorite of mine and I did it in Paris, Brazil and in London. And that was “The effects of deprivation on cults”. I remember that in Paris, I had such a hard time translating the title, which was “The Occurrence of Cults among deprived people”. And finding a word for deprived was a real tough thing because there is no exact definition. I think we ended up with ‘*dépourvu*’. That was one of my favorite lectures. It was one that was taken from a paper that I had written for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) on cults in Chicago. And we researched the cults that existed in and around Chicago in order to try and support this theses: that people who are deprived, socially or financially, or in any other way, tend to revert to known cults. It was a very good paper. And I have lost it. I am very unhappy about it because I don’t think I could reconstruct it again.

During the period of militant years in East St. Louis, I did a good deal of lecturing on the situation there, and how the young people had turned to violence, for want of an alternative of their own problems of deprivation. I was deeply interested in rational alternatives. And they listened. We went on to see Eric Fromm in New York, and then again once in Washington, with a group of four or five of the leaders. And Eric Fromm’s attitude was that there was no way to win anything by violence, that rational alternatives had to

be found, and one of the them was our Cultural Center, the Performing Arts Training Center (PATC), in which we feel we did a great deal of good. Another one was seeing that the leaders traveled. We wanted to see that they got into other atmospheres in other cities. And sometimes in taking a group of dancers from PATC out, part of the program would be the reading of the poetry written by these young people, and part would be a roundtable discussion between some of the militants and our own people. And this turned out to be a very exciting part of the program. We gave examples of dancing and singing, and of our percussion classes, suggesting that this might take off some of the tension and pressure of the situation of violence.

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D. DEMBY: I wondered if you would care to get back to some of the reminiscence or memories of your childhood. Can you tell me about any celebrations that you had with your family?

K. DUNHAM: Yes. Of course that would have to be what I suppose I call my second family, because until my real mother's death, I don't remember anything at all except for looking for hidden Easter eggs. Somehow that stuck with me because one Easter I didn't get Easter eggs, I got pieces of coal because I had been very naughty and had dirtied my pants in some way or other. Once Annette took over, and she was a great one for all the big holidays, Christmas became a very important day in our household, and birthdays were very important, especially the children's' birthdays. They are among the happy memories that I have of my childhood in Joliet, Illinois. Fortunately my birthday was in the summer, on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, and it was just a matter of whether it would rain or not which would determine the kind of birthday party that I would have. I remember them being out in the open in parks, one particular park we went to was called Bush Park. It was a very limited group of young people that my mother would allow me to associate with. She was very snobbish. There would be maybe a half dozen and we would enjoy the playgrounds of the park and always have a picnic lunch. These lunches were, I don't

know if you had them in your family or not, but we had fried chicken, loads of it, and potato salad. They followed a regular pattern, mustard greens, vegetables and wonderful homemade cakes.

D. DEMBY: Lemonade...

K. DUNHAM: And lemonade of course. I was very fond of fresh coconut cake. I know it must have been a great disappointment to my mother when she finally gave up trying to mail them around the world for my birthday, but she kept it up as long as she could. Sometimes they would arrive weeks late, or battered up or something like that, and she stopped and then she began to get too old to make them herself. When I was around eight or nine we had a horse and buggy, or surrey. The surrey was bigger, for the whole family, and we would ride the horse and carriage through the park. Then later on it would be either the automobile that was a delivery wagon for the business, or at some periods we would have a family car. I remember how delighted I was when my mother would let us put the top down. I thought that was a wonderful experience. She was very much opposed to being conspicuous and I don't know if this accounts, to some degree, for what I feel is a kind of timidity in me and most people, I think, feel that it is standoffish. But my mother would say, "Katherine, you're conspicuous enough. You don't have to have the top down."

D. DEMBY: I believe I saw a photograph of you as a child in some sort of little cart.

K. DUNHAM: Oh, the goat cart! That was in Chicago. I had finally learned how to make my way home by myself. This time a man was taking pictures of children in this goat cart and he said, "Little girl, wouldn't you like to have your picture made"? And I said, "Yes." And I got in the goat cart. He asked me where I lived and I told him. He came around a couple of days later. My mother was terribly upset, in the first place I should not have stopped when a stranger asked me to have my picture taken, and on top of that it costs twenty-five cents and she didn't have it. I remember how terrible I felt when, after he had gone, she said, "Katherine, that was my last twenty-five cents

and you must never do that kind of thing again.” We just couldn’t afford it at that time. It was a real tragedy to me to find that out.

D. DEMBY: Do you still have that photograph?

K. DUNHAM: I do, I don’t know if it’s a copy or the photograph itself. I’m not sure.

D. DEMBY: Could you tell me more about your brother?

K. DUNHAM: I remember him as being always trying to help me to see life in the right way, even when we were very small. And I depended so heavily on him. When I went to the University of Chicago, he had been ill. He had some problems with his lungs for awhile. When he came back from the hospital, his first thought seemed to be of how to use what he felt were my talents that I didn’t know about. I feel that he saw me and knew me as a person long before I knew myself at all.

I had no real social life and I know he was aware of the color bar more than I was. I think his interest in starting the ‘Cube Theater’ at the University of Chicago with his friend, Nick Matsoukas, was to help me find what I was looking for and what I expected, which would be a social milieu with the kind of friends and relationships that would reflect what I needed. He wanted to try and get this little theater going as a kind of vehicle through which I could express myself.

D. DEMBY: I understand some outstanding black artists were a part of the ‘Cube Theater.’ Would you tell me about some of them?

K. DUNHAM: At that time Arna Bontemps was in Chicago. Langston Hughes was frequently there. Charles White was part of our group. Coming in and out of Chicago it got to be that going to the ‘Cube Theater’ was a must for performers. Duke Ellington, Richard Wright, Horace Cayton, Sinclair Drake. But there was a group that I felt was more intellectual. They would come around the ‘Cube Theater’ now and then or be there to sort of help us morally, but those were all real scholars who didn’t have too much time for that sort of thing.

D. DEMBY: Would you say that this was the period when you began forming your own social friends.

K. DUNHAM: I think so. I had an apartment in Chicago and had parties with a very strange mixture of people. That's when I also met Bill and Ruth Attaway. As financially deprived as all of us were at the time, I somehow managed periodically to have some people over to my place. Even when we lived in a reformed stable, we used to have, like if *Porgy and Bess* was coming through, Rose McClendon, and I forget the other artist's names, come over.

D. DEMBY: Was this during the Depression? How did you fare?

K. DUNHAM: Well, (chuckles) I didn't fare very well. I had a hard time getting together enough money for carfare and food. Those were my big problems. At that time I set up housekeeping in a stable with Ruth and Bill Attaway.

D. DEMBY: Was this during the period that you found a job with the WPA? What was it you were doing with them?

K. DUNHAM: I was working in the Chicago Public Library before I went to the West Indies, but mostly it was part time job because of all my other business.

D. DEMBY: How and when did you first get the idea of a black ballet company, how did it come about?

K. DUNHAM: Well, maybe it was so that I could appear. Maybe I felt that there was no other way for me to be able to appear. I don't know that I thought it out, went to that length or not. But I knew that if I wanted to be on the stage I would just about have to provide the opportunity for myself.

D. DEMBY: Was that when Ruth Attaway was there to help you or was it Ruth Page?

K. DUNHAM: No. Ruth Page was from the north side of Chicago which was almost a racial division line. She was a dancer with the Chicago Opera, and she and Mark Turbyfill, who was also a dancer

with the Chicago Opera, helped me start a school in Chicago. There I trained the people, the core of the people who would later become the first Dunham Company.

D. DEMBY: I read that Mark Turbyfill was a teacher of yours, and encouraged you with your idea to start a *Ballet Nègre*, just as there was the *Ballets Russes*.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, he and Ruth Page helped me a lot together. For a brief period I had a studio in the 'Cube Theater' area, an artist-colony group, and he helped me a great deal in ballet training.

D. DEMBY: Was he black?

K. DUNHAM: No, he was white. He was the leading male dancer with the Chicago Opera.

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D. DEMBY: Somewhere I also read that you saw your life in phases.

K. DUNHAM: I think I have said that I have had three stages of development: the first one, the University of Chicago; the second one, the world; the third one East St. Louis. My stages of knowledge.

D. DEMBY: Dr. Redfield, the ethnologist, came into the picture and encouraged you to study.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, he encouraged me to try and dance without losing my interest in anthropology. He felt they could blend together and they did.

D. DEMBY: I was very much interested in the very astute way that you, as a young student, presented yourself to a very formidable Foundation, no less than the 'Julius Rosenwald Foundation', in an effort to get some funding for your work and studies. Could you tell me something about how you presented yourself to the Foundation? It certainly wasn't the usual presentation.

K. DUNHAM: No, I think the statement was made that I had taken off my skirt and I had a leotard under it, and did a demonstration. That is not quite accurate. When I spoke to the Rosenwald Foundation, it was on my return from the West Indies. I felt that I owed them something and wanted to show them what I had been doing. I ran off some film that I had taken while I was on this field trip, then showed them, accompanied by local music, a few of the dance steps that I was going to use later in developing my own Company. I did not take off my skirt. (laughs) I don't know what I had on, something I could move in I guess.

D. DEMBY: You not only responded to their questions but you provided them with a demonstration.

K. DUNHAM: Yes. The idea of lecture-demonstration has always been one that I highly approve of. I guess that was probably the first time I had done it myself. Then again, later, when we were appearing in *Cabin in the Sky*, I did my first lecture-demonstration at Yale. I discussed communities, primitive and western, and showed illustrated with *Rites de Passage*, the interest of the community in the events taking place in the life of the individual. I lectured about it and found that it was a very satisfactory way of getting the idea across.

D. DEMBY: How did you feel? Were you nervous?

K. DUNHAM: Oh, yes. I've never had to talk before a public in my life that I wasn't nervous. Someone once said, "Dancers are not speakers", and it is true. Some of us have had to, for various reasons, but ordinarily our communication is through the use of our body and one doesn't think about communicating through language.

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D. DEMBY: In retrospect do you see yourself as an anthropologist who became a dancer or a dancer who became an anthropologist?

K. DUNHAM: I don't really see myself so much as a dancer. I don't look at myself in that way although I certainly have all my history in theater as a dancer. I think I'm probably closer to anthropology.

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D. DEMBY: Did I understand that there was an interest in your running for Mayor of East St. Louis?

K. DUNHAM: (chuckles) Oh well, that's one of those things that goes around like a myth. At one time someone approached me with this brilliant idea that I should, and I laughed it off because that would be the last thing I'd do.

D. DEMBY: How in the course of your being a humanist and interested in people, their problems and their successes, did your families develop? I seem to get a picture of you having several kinds of families: you have your own family, your close family, your husband and your daughter; you have a... I don't know what to call it, an extended family, but certainly there is a cluster of people who see themselves as your family. Then, of course you've got your spiritual family. I wonder whether you'd care to talk about these families. Do you see it that way?

K. DUNHAM: I see that not only do I need people around me even though I like to be alone, if you can imagine that, but I need to think of them in very close terms. I need closeness, I'd say without familiarity, that sort of thing.

D. DEMBY: Within the *vodoun* cult I understand you also have a mother, *Yemanja*.

K. DUNHAM: Yes, when you are initiated you have a mother that takes care of all of your needs while you are going through the initiation: initiation into the losing or the casting out of everything that you have had before, or knowledge and your previous inheritance, and so forth; and replacing it with a whole new set of beliefs and ways of thinking so that it's like being born again. You are

treated as a helpless baby during the initiation. You do nothing for yourself and you have your mother and father, the *houngan* is your father and the presiding *mambo* is your mother. But I find myself with more children than I can really support. I mean I'll have someone call on me here at the Résidence and send word, "Tell her, her son is here", or "Tell her, her daughter is here," and that gets into such numbers that I can hardly remember them.

D. DEMBY: When did you learn to drum?

K. DUNHAM: Well, I'd say mostly in Haiti. Being able to drum helped me a lot. Women are not supposed to touch drums that have been baptized, but I didn't know that at the time and I went right ahead playing and learning how, and they seemed to feel that, well, it was acceptable.

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D. DEMBY: Your daughter, Marie-Christine, is in Europe?

K. DUNHAM: Yes, she lives in Rome and teaches Dunham Technique. She hated the idea of dancing because she saw the seamy side of it when she was a baby. She traveled a lot with us. She sings and plays the guitar and composes her own songs. A guitar has always been my favorite instrument because my father played one. I thought of this when my daughter selected a guitar as her instrument. It somehow runs in the family.

D. DEMBY: Well, to complete our interview Miss Dunham, do you have any final comments?

K. DUNHAM: The French often spoke of me as a *catalyst*, and I think that's probably as close to a description of me as one could get. I guess it is not only in theater, I find the same thing happening in my work in East St. Louis, or in my responsibilities here in Haiti. That I do seem to have some sort of a guide to do things and get things done, that seems to be a little bit ahead of current thinking. And then it's up to me to catalyze this particular drive.

D. DEMBY: Thank you very much Miss Dunham, and I thank you especially for the series of interviews during this very difficult period for you.

K. DUNHAM: Well believe me it's a tribute to you, Dorothy, because I am a very hard person to interview.