

Meeting Katherine Dunham

BY contrast with her intense vitality when performing, the celebrated dancer Katherine Dunham is completely relaxed offstage. She speaks quietly, with a soft American accent. In her extravaganza at present touring New Zealand her great knowledge of folklore and dancing of all kinds has been used to create a vivid spectacle. Here are Brazilian dances, ritual dances from the West Indies, Argentinian tangos, plantation dances and the cakewalk.

The show's fifteen scenes have subtle lighting and colourful décor, and the whole thing moves at a breakneck speed.

"How do you manage to keep up this Broadway pace wherever you go?" was the first question we put to her when we visited her in her dressing room just before the evening performance.

"Well, we carry all our own equipment," she said; "we've got our own lighting, curtains, hangings, stage décor and amplifiers. Most of our settings are flown and when we play in theatres that have only the bare four walls then we just have to build the necessary battens. Travelling round the world like this it's impossible to carry scenery. In our sets and décors we try to project to the audience the atmosphere that the number demands. In doing this, the lighting is very important."

Miss Dunham is an expert on stage lighting and over the years has experimented a great deal. "There was a period when I used footlights for nearly every show," she said. "I am also very opposed to arcs—they're too reminiscent of vaudeville. If a theatre has the right equipment then we don't use them. I have to use them here, but I don't approve of them. The difficulty is that people's eyes aren't trained to this type of show, and we need the arc to pick out the principal dancer in some way."

"What kind of lighting do you prefer?"

"Inside light," she replied, "where it's all within the proscenium. It doesn't

disturb the audience by throwing light across them, and it doesn't throw light on the backdrops. If I could have the ideal stage I'd have banks of lights inside the stage with perfect colour selecting apparatus."

Sometimes Katherine Dunham spends days on the lighting. "This is what makes a lighting crew feel I'm impossible," she said. "Gradually, though, when I point things out to them they begin to get interested, and after a while they feel disappointed if I don't pick on something that can be improved. In Australia they thought I was being difficult at first, but in the end they hated to see us go. It's really necessary to bring everybody in on these things."

In this show the orchestra is unusually important, and the conductor a key man. "Our conductor is also the pianist," said Miss Dunham. "This is essential the way we work. If we ever run into trouble and an instrument doesn't come in on time then the piano can pick it out. We depend very heavily on the piano."

The present conductor is especially good with voices. Miss Dunham usually finds that her conductors are experts in one field or another—it may be arranging, composing, or adapting a particular type of music to the theatre.

"We've had a Brazilian and an American conductor, and while they're with us that's often where our emphasis will lie. We once had an Argentinian who was very good at tangos. By having different conductors we manage to keep up with things. One man's speciality may lead him to neglect the jazz section, and this may then be corrected by his successor."

One of the simpler and most successful numbers presented by the company was "Los Indios," a scene set high in the Andes, where two Indian women break their journey in an encounter with a flute player. We asked Miss Dunham whether she had many similar dance-dramas in her repertoire.



KATHERINE DUNHAM as Dora, Queen of the Frevo and Maracatu—from "Brazilian Suite"

"We have some—we need this sort of thing which we can do before the curtains. We used to have Eartha Kitt in a little Cuban number. She was with us for a number of years, and was a great success in it. They're charming, I agree."

What did Miss Dunham think of the current craze for "Rock and Roll"?

"We're in a world period of thirst when young people in particular will grasp at anything without thinking," she replied. "In 'Rock and Roll' they've got the rhythm to grasp hold of and this is important. You'll grab at anything when in a state of uncertainty and insecurity. 'Rock and Roll' itself is of no value. It's a poor man's version of the really fine blues known as the 'shouting blues' which I've been familiar with since a young girl. I see 'Rock and Roll' only as a social phenomenon. I don't see it changing the musical picture in the slightest. It's like taking out an old record and re-recording it with Elvis Presley instead of a blues singer. It's completely borrowed, but it is something that gives them the feeling of having their feet on the earth. It's not as important as Dixie, jazz, rumba or mambo, and it's now being followed by calypso. The young generation goes so fast today that they're desperate for something. They have to reach quickly back into the past. We have movie revivals, revivals of old fashions and this reaching back into the past is particularly noticeable in music. It's as though we were unable to create new things. There's no time today to develop truly creative, experimental things. 'Rock and Roll' is like a person who's been around a long time. What will we have next? The waltz? Maybe—you can't tell."



LEFT: L'Ag'ya—an original ballet by Katherine Dunham, set in Martinique